

Engaging Children in Difficult Conversations

Our first instinct as adults is to protect children from information deemed as “too difficult to understand.”

While this is true when the information serves no purpose, children need to discuss life events so they can appropriately make sense out of what is happening. When done with real intent and thoughtfulness, talking about current events provides the opportunity to help children develop critical thinking skills, as well as provides the chance to educate and encourage appropriate action in terms of diversity, ending racism and supporting community.

Tips on How to Engage Children in Difficult Conversations:

1. While a little bit of live news is okay, exposing children to too much TV news coverage is not healthy. Children need to know what is happening, but the majority of that information is best to come from a parent or another trusted adult so that the information can be tailored to a child’s comprehension and emotional fortitude.
2. Transparency means being honest with a child when they ask a question and sharing information ahead of time when possible. Transparency and honesty can take some of the mystery or sting out of bad news and tragic events.
3. The best way to talk about difficult topics is to ask the child questions and then let their answers guide the next part of the conversation.
4. If a child will not engage in difficult conversations after multiple attempts, do not push, just let it go. Be ready to engage when the child comes back and starts asking questions. When a child asks questions, it is a sign that their brain is ready for the information. Keep answering their questions until they stop asking.
5. Try hard to avoid strong reactions if a child says something you do not like or when they say something you disagree with. Instead, keep asking the child questions; support them to express their thoughts and feelings. As the conversation unfolds, provide alternative information to correct misunderstandings or falsities.





6. A difficult conversation is just that, a conversation. Having a difficult conversation is not about getting on a soap box and talking down to a child. If you are the only one talking, this might be your signal that you are lecturing. If this happens, shift gears by asking the child their opinion.
7. Seize the opportunity to teach children how to recognize stereotypical thinking and behavior in their own life. But don't just talk about it, teach them how they should behave and how to change such thinking.
8. Try to get children to share their ideas for solutions to community problems. Take it one step further and ask them what they think they can do to make the world a better place, then go out and help them do it.
9. Teach children to avoid all or nothing thinking. People are not all good or all bad; we all make both good AND bad decisions. All or nothing thinking feeds into biases and division among people. When we can hold two perspectives at the same time, we teach children to be more flexible in their thinking and beliefs.
10. Last, and maybe the most important, teach children empathy. Try to describe what it must be like for people who are struggling. You do not have to be victim to empathize and commit to listening to others, attempting to understand, and putting yourself in another person's shoes. Use stories to teach empathy; stories help create a picture in a child's mind and they elicit creative energy, opening a child up to considering different possibilities.