

consequence. How do you create such an atmosphere? By being encouraging, supportive and positive. For example, if your child asks, "How many people have AIDS?" try not to answer with, "I don't know. Please just finish your lunch." No matter how busy you are respond with something like, "That's an interesting question, but I'm not sure. Let's go look it up." (FYI: Don't worry that if your children learn that you don't know everything, they won't look up to you. That's simply not true. Kids accept, "I don't know," and "let's go find out," and they are better responses than any inaccurate or misleading answers you may be tempted to offer.) One more point: You don't need to answer all of your children's questions immediately. If your 10-year-old asks, "Mom, what's a condom?" while you're negotiating a tricky turn in rush-hour traffic, it's perfectly okay for you to say something like, "That's an important question. But with all this traffic, I can't explain right now. Let's talk later, after dinner." And make sure you do.

5. Communicate your values.

As a parent, you have a wonderful opportunity to be the first person to talk with your child about tough issues like drugs and violence before anyone else can confuse him with "just-the-facts" explanations that lack the sense of values and moral principles you want to instil. Likewise, when talking with your child about sex, remember to talk about more than "the birds and the bees," and communicate your values. Remember: research shows that children want and need moral guidance from their moms and dads, so don't hesitate to make your beliefs clear.

6. Listen to your child.

How many times do we listen to our children while folding clothes, preparing for the next day's meeting, or pushing a shopping cart through the supermarket? While that's understandable, it's important to find time to give kids our undivided attention. Listening carefully to our children builds self-esteem by letting our youngsters know that they're important to us and can lead to valuable discussions about a wide variety of sensitive issues. Listening carefully also helps us better understand what our children really want to know as well as what they already understand. And it keeps us from talking above our youngsters' heads and confusing them even further. For example, suppose your child asks you what crack is. Before you answer, ask him what he thinks it is. If he says, "I think it's something you eat that makes you act funny," then you have a sense of his level of understanding and can adjust your explanations to fit.

7. Try to be honest.

Whatever your children's age, they deserve honest answers and explanations. It's what strengthens our children's ability to trust. Also, when we don't provide a straightforward answer, kids make up their own fantasy explanations, which can be more frightening than any real, honest response we can offer. While we may not want or need to share all the details of a particular situation or issue with our child, try not to leave any big gaps either. When we do, children tend to fill in the blanks themselves, which can generate a good deal of confusion and concern.

8. Be patient.

Often it can feel like forever before a youngster gets his story out. As adults, we're tempted to finish the child's sentence for him, filling in words and phrases in an effort to hear the point sooner. Try to resist this impulse. By listening patiently, we allow our children to think at their own pace and we are letting them know that they are worthy of our time.

9. Use everyday opportunities to talk.

It's important to try to talk with your kids about tough issues often, but there isn't always time in the day to sit down for a long talk. Also, kids tend to resist formal discussions about today's toughest issues, often categorizing them as just another lecture from mom and dad. But if we use "talk opportunities," moments that arise in everyday life, as occasions for discussion, our children will be a lot less likely to tune us out. For instance, a newspaper item about a child expelled from school for carrying a gun to class can help you start a discussion on guns and violence.

10. Talk about it again. And again.

Since most young children can only take in small bits of information at any one time, they won't learn all they need to know about a particular topic from a single discussion. That's why it's important to let a little time pass, then ask the child to tell you what she remembers about your conversation. This will help you correct any misconceptions and fill in missing facts. Finally, in an effort to absorb all they want to know, children often ask questions again and again over time -- which can test any parent's nerves. But such repetition is perfectly normal, so be prepared and tolerant. Don't be afraid to initiate discussions repeatedly, either. Patience and persistence will serve you and your child well.

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