

How to Have Hard Conversations with Your Kids



Tool #1: Reflect On Your Reactions

The most important tool, and the first place to start, is being aware of your own story and how that influences your perception and experience. Pay attention to your body and be aware of what it is trying to tell you.

THINGS TO ASK YOURSELF:

- *How did my parents handle this type of situation? What types of emotions does this topic bring up in me when I think about it?*
- *How do I know I am getting angry/upset/sad? What signals does my body send to let me know I need to pay attention and take a break from the conversation?*

THINGS TO SAY:

- *This is a really important topic and I want to give it the respect it deserves, but right now I am feeling some really strong emotions. I am going to go grab a drink of water, and I will be back in a few minutes so we can keep talking about this.*

A Next Step To Take

- **Pause and reflect**
Take a moment to recognize your feelings. Could past experiences be shaping how you're reacting right now?
- **Identify your emotions**
Are you feeling frustrated, disappointed, or like you need to control the situation? Take a deep breath and name the emotion.
- **Be mindful of your body**
Pay attention to how your body feels. Is your heart racing, or do you feel tense?
- **Practice box breathing**
Calm your body by taking slow, deep breaths. Breathe in for 4 seconds, hold for 4, exhale for 4, and hold again for 4 seconds. Repeat until you feel more grounded.
- **Seek support if needed**
If you're struggling to stay calm, it's okay to take a step back and talk with a friend or your spouse to gather your thoughts and gain more understanding as to why this topic is difficult.



Tool #2: Create A Safe Space

Kids are often more open to talking when they feel heard. By being curious and asking open ended questions, you let them know that you care about their experience and want to hear what they have to say. Remember, your nonverbal cues matter just as much as the words you say.

THINGS TO SAY:

- *I notice you seem a little different. What is taking up the most space in your mind? (Child says, "Nothing.") Ok, well if you change your mind, we can definitely talk more today on the ride to soccer practice. I just want you to know you are important to me and I want to hear what you have to say.*
- *I got a note from your teacher about something that happened at school today, and I'd love to hear it from you. Can you tell me more?*
- *I noticed you got a lower grade on your math test than usual. What was that like for you when you saw it?*

A Next Step To Take

- **Practice your responses**
Stand in front of a mirror and prepare a calm, open posture and facial expressions. Aim for a vertical nod and not a sideways nod, keeping your tone calm and non-judgmental as you hear your kid's perspective.
- **Listen actively**
Make space for them to share and show them you're fully engaged in the conversation, ready to listen and not interrupt or argue. Avoid a lecture and one-sided talk from you.
- **Ask open-ended questions:**
Instead of asking, "Is everything okay?" try, "What's on your mind?" This shifts the focus from a simple yes or no answer to inviting them to share what they're really thinking or feeling.




Tool #3 Start Simple And Be Age Appropriate

Break down complex topics into age-appropriate steps by meeting your child where they are, not where you hope they'll be. Understand their developmental stage and what they can grasp. Children may need time to process and revisit conversations. Be aware of outside influences like friends, siblings, and media; it's better to gently introduce topics and gauge their exposure than wait until they bring it up. Even if you're not ready, your child might need to hear these things now.

THINGS TO SAY:

- *I heard you watching a video that mentioned some pretty adult words. Have you heard those words before? Do you know what they mean?*
- *Child: Why does that person walk funny? Adult: I see you are noticing what makes people different! Everyone has differences, and this person has their own way of walking that is different from you. What makes you different from him?*

A Next Step To Take

- **Tell the truth**
If they ask you a direct question, don't lie. If you don't know the answer, tell them you don't know but you will let them know when you know more. Remind them you are with them, that you will be there to answer any more questions they have, and that you will walk through this together.
 - **Let their questions guide the conversation**
Sometimes they are only looking for an answer to a specific question. We can be tempted to explain large, complex ideas in great detail. Instead, go slowly, pause, and see how they respond.
-
- 

Tool #4 Plan For Ongoing Conversations

Viewing hard conversations as ongoing takes the pressure of getting everything right the first time. It also gives your child the space to digest the information you gave them and come back to you when they are ready for more.

THINGS TO SAY:

- *I love hearing what you have to say, and I am glad we were able to talk about this.*
- *Thank you for coming to me with this. It was a very important question, and I am here to talk more about it if you think of something else. And if I think of something else I forgot to mention, is it ok if I come to you?*
- *I was thinking maybe we could grab something to eat, just the two of us, on Friday after school and maybe talk about the thing you brought up last night at bedtime. I know we weren't able to finish our conversation, and I want you to know it is important that we take time to discuss it!*

A Next Step To Take

- **Make yourself consistently available at predictable times**
 - **For older kids**, this might mean hanging out on the couch in the evenings in case they want to talk about something or making it a habit of not having screens in the car.
 - **For younger kids**, this might mean 15-20 minutes of one-on-one play time and minimize outside distractions to create focused attention on them.
- **Create opportunities for organic conversation**

You can do this by sharing the highs and lows of the day, or using “Conversation cards” at dinnertime to facilitate discussions. Bedtime is a normal time for kids to want to process their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Try moving bedtime a little earlier on certain days to leave room for conversation.



Tool #5 Involve Trusted Adults

You were not meant to do this alone! Seek out other parents who are in the same stages of life as you and talk through experiences together. Find parents who are a few steps ahead of you and ask them how they handled challenging situations, what they think worked, and what they wish they had done differently. Invite the Lord into these hard spaces, pray over your children, and ask Him to bring you trusted adults to walk together in this.

THINGS TO SAY:

- *We've been struggling with our kids' current school choice and are looking at switching schools. I remember you saying your kids have gone to both public and private school, and I was wondering if we could talk more about how you knew what the right decision was?*
- *I noticed your teens are with you at church every week, and it made me wonder what it looks like to balance giving them autonomy over their lives and encouraging them to practice important habits like attending church. How have you all navigated this with your teens?*

A Next Step To Take

- **Pursue community at church**
Join a small group, Bible study, or class at church.
- **Invite mentors into your life**
Ask a friend whose kids are older than yours if they want to go grab coffee or dessert one evening to talk through their experience and share yours.
- **Be a continual learner**
Read a book together with your partner from our recommended resources, and talk through what you think could work or be helpful for your family.

