

Awkward conversations, and how to have them

Psychotherapist Mark Linington offers advice for tackling tricky topics

When one of my sons was 10, I sat him down and had a chat with him about internet porn. It didn't go as well as I hoped. For one thing, I could see he was nervous when I asked if we could have a talk. Then, I muddled my words. He blushed and said, "This is awkward" and we agreed we would do it another time.

So, don't do what I did and have 'the chat' as a special thing. Instead, fit it into a time you are doing an activity together, or walking or driving somewhere. My son is now 16 and we have had many more successful conversations since. I learnt my lesson.

Practise. You will be calmer if you've

talked it through with someone, such as a partner or friend, beforehand.

Go slowly. When talking about pornography, for example, a couple of sentences which introduce in simple language what it is can be a massive step (something like, "Pornography is pictures or films of people doing something sexual together"). You can always go back to the subject again.

The secure adult who listens

Be interested in what they say. Asking a question or two about what they think, especially with teenagers, can help young people develop their own thoughts on a difficult subject.

Don't judge. If they say something you disagree with, you can explain there are other ways of seeing things, but make a distinction between what

are your opinions and what are facts. The important thing is to be the secure adult who will listen, no matter what. Be someone they know they can return to when things are difficult.

Encourage them to think critically about what their friends say. Young people often talk to their friends about the same issues you're concerned about. However, peer groups can be a source of misinformation, so teaching your child to question what's being said to them is an important skill for life (see page 12 for more).

Mark Linington is an attachment-based psychotherapist who works with children, parents and carers at special schools and The Bowlby Centre, London.



What you can do

Turn to tech

Talking doesn't just happen face-to-face. If your child communicates with their friends by Snapchat or WhatsApp, you can do the same. Apps, or good old-fashioned texting, can be a useful tool to follow up a conversation without embarrassment, or simply

just to let them know you're there if they need you.

Use the news

If you think your child may be taking risks online, it may be easier to talk about something that has happened to someone else first, as a way in.

Mentioning stories you've seen on TV or social media, or conversations you've had with other parents about things their children have experienced

online, can be useful ways to start a conversation about a difficult subject.

Finding the right words for very young children

Cyberbullying can be difficult to explain to very young children. So, rather than asking them if they're being bullied, ask them if anyone they've talked to online is being mean or has tried to make them look bad.

Parents and grandparents sometimes use cute terms

for genitals when children are young, but kids who are used to using the correct terms for body parts, and know what penis or vagina mean, are more likely to recognise when someone is behaving inappropriately.

On that point, even the term 'inappropriate' could confuse younger children. Instead, ask about whether someone made them have 'that feeling in your tummy when you know something isn't quite right'.



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