

How to talk with your kids about difficult topics

By NATALIE KOLLROSS, Psy.D.

All families deal with difficult issues ranging from the death of a family pet to illness of a family member to divorce. It's best to be open and honest with your child and not hide important things from them. Children have an uncanny way of knowing something is not

right and either figuring it out or suffering in silence due to fear and confusion. Research has shown, and I have seen in my experience as a psychologist, that when a child finds out a family secret they are hurt more deeply and longer than if they would have known in the beginning. Sharing difficult things affords you as the parent more control in how and what you want to share with your child. It gives you the power to share, bit-by-bit, the necessary information, gauge their response and respond accordingly.

When a child discovers something on their own, or from someone else, you have no control over what they hear or how they hear it. I am not advocating being an open book to your children. However, when it comes to things that do or will significantly change your child's life, I think it is important to explain it to them on your terms so they have time to adjust. This applies to things that have happened, are happening or are certain to happen — not possibilities. Here are some tips for discussing challenging family topics:

Don't sugar coat it or use euphemisms. For example, if a pet

fish dies, just say "the pet fish died" not "the pet fish went to a great aquarium in California." Or if an uncle is going to jail, say, "Uncle Dan broke the law and has to go to jail" not "Uncle Dan is going on vacation for a while." Kids can take the truth and they understand more than you think.



Use age-appropriate language and be clear and concise. Your child needs to know that (a) something has changed and (b) how it will affect them. They don't need to know all the details. They will not understand jargon and technical terms. They will understand simple factual statements. Break it to them at a level they can understand. If your child is in elementary school and grandma was diagnosed with cancer tell him or her something like "Grandma has cancer, which is a disease, and the doctors are going to try to help her get better."

There is a fine line between honesty and oversharing. When I say be honest and state the facts that doesn't mean tell kids unnecessary information that will only

scare them and leave them feeling more hopeless. For example, if grandma has cancer and you as a parent are scared, that's okay, but don't say things like "I had a nightmare Grandma died" or "Grandma is losing all of her money to medical treatment and will be poor." Stick to the facts, don't embellish based on your own anxieties.

Kids will have questions, answer them the best you can. Give younger children, simple and succinct bits of information. Older kids and teens will be able to understand more. With the example above, teens will understand things like chemotherapy and radiation,

young children will understand that doctors give medicine.

Try to instill hope. Giving the facts doesn't mean you have to be void of hope or positivity. If a family member is in jail, perhaps the child can write to them and draw them pictures to stay connected. They



Strategies

can visit a sick relative to brighten their day. They can hope and pray for the best. They can make a memory box for a deceased pet. Help them see the silver lining in difficult times.

Remember, kids are resilient. They won't necessarily be devastated by something bad happening, and if they are, there is help. Kids hold a lot of hope, but can also hold a lot of fear. They can feel powerless. Sharing family information with them also allows them time to emotionally adjust to the changes, rather than finding out all at once. By giving them information and answering their questions in an appropriate way, it helps them feel more in control, more secure, and safer. By being open, you are teaching and modeling for your child how to deal with life struggles — and that is one of the best lessons a parent can give.

Dr. Kollross is a psychologist at Psychological Services of Pendleton and mother of two.

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