

Parent Guide



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What is this resource and how do I use it?

When approaching difficult conversations with your child, it can be hard to know how to help them feel relaxed and supported. In this resource, we offer helpful advice for how to set up a safe space for having conversations with your child, including thinking about physical space, timing, emotional safety and starting the conversation.

What is the focus of this resource?

Conversations

Offering Support

Safe Space

Further Ideas and Suggestions

For more resources to help you support your child, head to the [Supporting Your Child](#) section of our [Parent's Hub](#).

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How to Set Up a

Safe Space

for Conversations with Children

There are many reasons why you might need to have a serious or difficult conversation with your child. You might need to:

- discuss some bad news; regarding your child;
- talk about important topics e.g. sex, drugs or internet safety; talk to your child about a new behaviour you've noticed from them;
- discuss something you are worried about talk to your child about issues and concerns within your family.

Having difficult conversations with your child may feel daunting. It is likely your child will feel anxious or uncomfortable about the conversation too and this could lead to them being uncommunicative, defensive or aggressive when you try to talk to them. Therefore, it is important for both of you to take the time to set up a safe space for the conversation. Setting up a safe space involves thinking about physical space, timing, emotional safety and positive ways to start the conversation. Above all, you need to be calm and clear with your child that your aim in having the conversation is to love and support them.

In this resource, we offer helpful advice on how to set up a safe space for having conversations with your child. Remember, you know your child best, so in all things, consider your own personal situation and trust your judgement.

Physical Space

When you are planning to have a difficult or important conversation with your child, it is helpful to think about the physical space in which your conversation will take place. The physical environment can have a big impact on how safe your child feels and how comfortable they are talking to you and opening up - so think carefully about what will work best for you both. It can be helpful to consider the following:

Non-Threatening Environment

Choose a relaxed space. Some children might find it less threatening if you are not facing one another during the conversation such as in the car or on a walk.

Physical Comfort

Choose a space where you will both be comfortable. It could be somewhere outdoors or indoors, sitting on a cosy sofa or a walk in the woods - think about what works best for you and your child.

Neutral Environment

It can sometimes help to choose a space that is not too personal to either of you, such as a cafe, in the car or in a shared living space. Choose a space where you will feel like you have some privacy.

Time

It is important to choose an appropriate time for difficult conversations. If your child is tired, hungry or distracted, then it is likely your conversation will go awry or feel fraught and stressful. Consider the following:

Time of Day

Choose a time of day when you will both feel alert and relaxed rather than tired, hungry or too busy.

Length of Time

Choose a time when you will not feel rushed. Difficult conversations need space and time to unfold so think carefully about your timing.

Privacy

Choose a time when you are unlikely to be interrupted by other people in the environment.

Emotional Safety

When having a difficult or important conversation with your child, it is crucially important that they feel safe emotionally as this will help them to relax and open up to you. There are many things to consider when creating a space that provides emotional safety:

Acknowledge Discomfort

Acknowledging discomfort can help to put everyone at ease. Acknowledge that you might both feel uncomfortable having a difficult conversation. Iterate that this is ok and that all feelings are valid.

Reassure

Be clear from the start that you would like to have a conversation to support and not judge. Reassure your child that you love them and want to listen to them. Reassure by being calm and compassionate in your manner.

Active Listening

Active listening is where you listen with unconditional acceptance and without judgement or bias. Explain to your child that this is how you intend to listen to them. Give your child your full attention, hear their words and show you are listening by asking thoughtful questions.

Open-Ended Questions

Ask open-ended questions, such as 'how did you feel about that?' Open-ended questions will help your child to feel listened to, supported and they will also encourage your child to give thoughtful, meaningful responses.

Empathise and Understand

Empathy and understanding should be at the heart of your conversation. In every question you ask, word you speak and in your manner, you should aim to show that you wish to understand, support and care.

Be Curious

You should aim to listen more than you speak. Display curiosity rather than anger, judgement and blame. This will help your child to feel like your love and attention is cradling them and providing safety.

Starting the Conversation

Starting a difficult or important conversation is often one of the hardest parts. It can be helpful to think in advance about what you might say or do to start the conversation - this will help you and your child to feel safer. Consider the following:

Time of Day

Before you start a difficult conversation with your child, think carefully about what you wish to talk to them about, what the aim of the conversation is, what questions you might ask and how you intend to support your child.

Length of Time

A forceful opening to the conversation might make your child feel anxious or uncomfortable. Instead, think about starting the conversation in a more subtle way, such as using a book or TV show as a way into the conversation or starting with an open-ended question.

Privacy

Sometimes it can be effective to use methods other than words to start a conversation. For example, you could use drawing, writing or role play to help your child express how they are feeling about something. You can then use this as the focus point for your conversation.

When Children Come To You

Sometimes your child might come to you to talk about a worry or concern. It can be helpful for you to have a plan in place in your mind ready for when this happens. Consider the following:

Be Warm and Reassuring

Your child might catch you by surprise when they come to talk to you. While you gather yourself together for a conversation, take a breath, thank them for coming to talk to you and reassure them that you would like to listen and support them.

Timing

It may be that your child has started a conversation with you at a time that is not appropriate, such as when you're busy or just before school. With care and kindness, explain to your child that you'd really like to listen and in order to do that you would like to choose a more appropriate time and place. Choose this together.

Listen with Care

Listening can sometimes feel harder when we are caught off guard by a difficult conversation. Before you start the conversation, remind yourself to be active in your listening and to listen with complete acceptance and without bias or judgement.

We hope you find the information on our website and resources useful. As far as possible, the contents of this resource are reflective of current research and are intended for guidance purposes only. The information or resource may not specifically apply to you or your children. If you are using these resources in a professional setting, please also always follow your setting's safeguarding policies and procedures. Please ensure that consent is always sought when working with a young person and that the child understands the need to break confidentiality if the adult feels that they are at risk of harm.