

Talking with Your Children About Sensitive Issues

© Copyright by Bob Ditter, 2003

- 1) Speaking with your child about sensitive issues is always easier if you have a **history** or **habit** of speaking with your child about life in general. Begin cultivating that habit as early as you can, talking about friends, school, sports, hobbies—anything positive the child is interested in.
- 2) **Make talking a ritual.** Do it routinely, make it pleasant and upbeat, keep it separate from discipline or other “talks.” Talk at the dinner table, at night before bed, at the breakfast table—whatever works for your family.
- 3) **Vary the talks.** Make some family conversations and some one-on-one with each child.
- 4) Sometimes **food helps!** Again, making it a pleasant experience that your children see as “nourishing” will help.
- 5) **Stay with it!** If you haven’t cultivated the habit of talking with your child/children, start now and stay with it. It may take some time for your children to get comfortable with it.
- 6) With boys in particular, sometimes **moving around, doing something or riding in the car** helps the conversation along.
- 7) When you bring up a subject like sex, drugs or other concerns, try to focus yourself beforehand. The more your comments are made out of fear, the more your children may think you don’t trust them.
- 8) **Less is more.** Especially with topics like sex, death and drugs, *you do not have to say everything you want to say in one sitting!* Children will often tune out or change the subject when they have had enough.
- 9) **Beware of talking out of nervousness.** It is normal to be anxious when speaking about sensitive issues with your child. However, if you don’t control your own anxiety, you may say more than your child can absorb *and* you may end up being a poor listener.
- 10) **Watch out for signs that your child wants to talk.** Often, boys in particular, or girls if they are embarrassed or angry, will open up hours after you first speak with them. Watch for signs that they are *hanging out* waiting for you to pick up on their wanting to talk. In boys we call this *timed silence*: not being able to talk right away, but maybe later.
- 11) Tell your child “the door is always open.” Then make time when they come to you!

- 12) **Get the facts straight!** If you wish to speak with your child about sex or drugs or dating or death, know your stuff! The more you can come across as knowledgeable, the more impressed your children will be about how open you are.
- 13) **Use “I statements” and share your own experiences.** (You may wish to edit them first!) Your children will relate to you more openly if they see that you are human, too. Be careful, though, to maintain a proper boundaries. Becoming too familiar with your children is confusing to them. Though you are human, you are also their parent!
- 14) **Stay calm!** Topics like death, sex, drugs and so on make all of us nervous. The most important thing is that your children see that you care enough to want to share things with them.
- 15) **Speak to a trusted friend or other parent.** The most important piece of advice I can give to parents, besides “talk to your kids,” is, “talk to other parents!”

Bob Ditter is a child and family therapist from Boston, Mass, who works extensively with people who work with children. He visits summer camps throughout the United States helping them be the best place possible for children.

Robert B. Ditter, M.Ed., LCSW
72 Montgomery Street • Boston, Ma 02116
617-572-3353 (tel) • 617-572-3373 (fax)
bobditter1@aol.com (e-mail)