




PARENT GUIDE

Difficult Conversations



Your kids *will* talk to you about things you talk to them about. Your kids *won't* talk to you about things you don't talk to them about."

CRAIG GROSS

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Are Your Kids Even Listening?

If you asked a teenager to name their all-time favorite band or artist, you probably have a good idea who most would say.

Taylor Swift...

Billie Eilish...

Sabrina Carpenter...

Harry Styles...

For the average 13-year-old, you'd probably be right.

But Bethany isn't your average 13-year-old.

Her all-time favorite band? The Beatles! Yes, that's right, a girl born decades after the British sensation hit the airwaves can tell you every song in their repertoire, sing along to every lyric on their albums, share every fact about their history, and tell you the ins and outs of just about anything you would ever need to know about their career. She is arguably the Beatles' #1 fan (at least in her age range).

And it's all thanks to her parents.

Ever since Bethany can remember, her parents have made the Beatles a staple in the fabric of their family. She knows their songs because her parents played them. She can sing the lyrics because her parents sang them with her. She can tell you everything about their history because her parents told her. She knows the details of their story because her parents shared those details with her first.

Even if they didn't realize it, when her parents were talking about the Beatles, Bethany was listening.

Believe it or not, the same is true for your kids. Whether we realize it or not, our kids are always listening to and learning from the things we share with them. You, their parents, are actually the biggest influence on your teens' lives.

A **recent Gallup poll** showed that an overwhelming majority of Gen Zers said it's helpful when their parents talk to them about various aspects of their lives. Gallup writes: "Although many parents are hesitant to bring up sensitive subjects with their children, kids generally find it to be beneficial."

An **older study put out by the Barna Group** found that 3 out of 5 parents believe they hold the primary responsibility for developing their child's faith and navigating conversations around their worldview.

Based on the research, the formula seems to be a no-brainer:

Most kids finding it helpful for their parents to talk to them about issues they face + Most parents wanting to be the primary voice in their child's life = A healthy conversation between kids and parents.

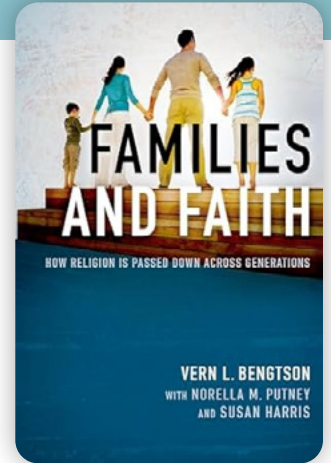
But as we all know, having difficult conversations with our kids is so much more complicated than a formula.



The One Conversation



As parents, we have the unique ability to shape how our kids see... well, just about everything. Psychologist and professor Vern Bengtson and his team conducted the largest-ever study of religion and family across generations, spanning 40 years of research. Their findings, published in the 2013 book ***Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down Across Generations***, show that parents have much more influence than they think they do on their teens' worldview.



The challenge? **Many parents don't feel equipped** to talk about the big, heavy, or even scary topics their teens need to hear from them on—topics like sex, bullying, suicide, pornography, death, and mental health.

But just as we wouldn't turn over the keys and put our kids behind the wheel without any training, we can't expect them to be equipped to face difficult circumstances or challenging topics without a little preparation.

That's where the One Conversation comes in.

Instead of seeing each difficult topic you need to cover with your kid as a single talk or discussion—one that begins and ends when the dialogue is done—we recommend seeing each topic as a part of one bigger conversation.

One conversation that starts now, when your kids are young.

One conversation that continues as they grow and develop.

One conversation that's made up of smaller discussions and dialogues along the way.

One conversation that lasts a lifetime.



Each conversation you have with your kid is just one small part of the lifelong conversation you're having with them over the long haul. It's a continuous, organic dialogue that does more than equip your kids for potential challenges; it strengthens your relationship with your child as they grow, too.

The good news? This isn't as complicated as it may sound. As you spend time with your child, look for ways to care about the things they care about. Ask curious questions of them to learn more about what they're thinking and feeling. Seize the opportunity to talk about difficult topics when they naturally arise.

The goal isn't to squeeze every topic in with your kids all at once. It's simply to keep the conversation going by building intentional dialogue with your kids into whatever else you're doing in your lives.

Every interaction with our kids is part of one big conversation we're having over a lifetime. Sometimes, that conversation is easy to navigate, but other times, it's a little more complicated. Either way, the goal is the same: to keep the conversation going.

After all, isn't that how a relationship stays strong?

Jesus Himself modeled this for us in His own relationships on Earth. **Jesus asked 307 questions in the gospels alone**, each one designed to do more than just teach a lesson. Jesus' questions weren't just about Him; they were about the things that matter to others. They were questions designed to build a connection, an understanding, and a conversation that could continue as the relationship grew.

As you consider how to keep that One Conversation with your kids going, we encourage you to think of it as a valuable opportunity from our gracious God to follow the model of Jesus and connect with your kids in a very real way. Handled well, these conversations will not only allow you to influence your kids in important areas of life, they'll also help you grow closer together.

You're opening the door to show that they don't have to be afraid of difficult topics or run away from subjects that intimidate them. You're giving them a voice in the conversation to ask questions, share experiences, and make decisions that matter. And best of all? You're making sure they know you're a safe space to come to for the rest of their lives.

Related: This One Conversation Could Change How You Parent Your Kids Forever



3 Keys To Successfully Having The One Conversation



1. Build a strong relationship.

For most parents, this is a no-brainer. Who doesn't want a strong, quality relationship with their kids? The reality is, **Dr. Bengtson's research indicates** that some parents "may not be aware that it is the nature and quality of the relationship they have with their child that is crucial—perhaps as much or if not more than what parents do." While Bengtson and associates were talking specifically about the development of faith in our children here, the same principle can apply to any aspect of the One Conversation.



If we as parents aren't trying to connect with our kids and build a strong relationship over time, our authoritative voice in their lives can suffer. So, before you even start talking, start connecting. Do what you can to build relational equity that will help them be more receptive to what you want to convey as the conversation continues.

TRY THIS

- Do something they love with them just for fun.
- Spend time with them in a way that speaks to your interest in who they are.
- Ask them to teach you about something they're into right now.
- Attend their events, show up for their special moments, and stay present in their lives outside of your home.



2. Approach them with genuine openness.

Your kids are their own people. That means they're going to have their own ideas, thoughts, experiences, and worldview. Our job as parents is to help shape that worldview through a Biblical perspective from the time they're young. However, that shouldn't cause us to close off or shut down their ideas, questions, and doubts that may differ from or challenge that perspective.

Psychologist and researcher Lisa Damour points out “just how helpful these conversations are and how much they [teenagers] care about what adults have to say.” Damour’s encouragement to parents is to maintain an open dialogue with an open mind: “My advice to anyone caring for a teenager is to go ahead and have the conversation about whatever is you’re worried about.” In other words, start the conversation with a genuine openness.



TRY THIS

- Make space for your kid’s moments of doubt or disagreement.
- Ask questions without an agenda or response.
- Don’t always give them the answers; let them wrestle with it as you listen.
- Put yourself in their shoes and attempt to understand their perspective.

3. Create continual conversation.

Remember, every interaction you have with your kid is a part of the One Conversation you hope to keep having over the course of his or her lifetime. So, as you approach any opportunity for dialogue with your kid, do your best to keep it open-ended. Don’t let the conversation about one challenging or intimidating topic end just because that interaction with your kid ends. Instead, find authentic ways to come back to the subject, to ask more questions, and to keep the conversation going. Because if you don’t, chances are someone else will.

TRY THIS

- Seize natural opportunities to bring topics up.
- Ask follow-up questions.
- Try to remember specific things your kid said to let them know you were paying attention.
- Share what you’re learning from them, too.

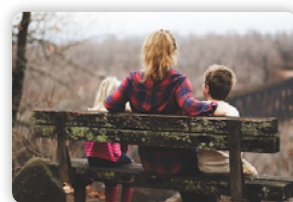


15 Tips For Making Your One Conversation Successful



1. Keep it age appropriate. The truth is that any age is a great age to start the One Conversation—and the younger, the better. Just be sure to adjust the level of detail, word choice, questions, and examples you give depending on their ages.

2. Be proactive, not reactive. **Psychologists suggest** that “proactive parenting... can help us respond from a less emotional place and give our children a greater sense of stability and security.” So, make it part of your family culture to have open and ongoing conversations about difficult topics, not only in response to an issue but as a proactive way to engage them before issues arise.



3. Pick the right time. Be strategic in the timing of the conversations. Avoid times when you or your kids will be tired or stressed, as that's a recipe for potential conflict and emotionally intense responses. If you start the dialogue, make sure you have enough time to finish it so you don't have to conclude prematurely.

4. Be intentional. Be on the lookout for organic ways to bring up topics with your children. For example, you could use experiences from daily life, like what they're watching on TV, what they're learning about at school, what they've seen on social media, what they've experienced with friends, or even what they're learning in scripture.

5. Avoid distractions. Avoid places that are noisy, or potentially overwhelming for your kid. For example, you don't want to talk to them about sex in the local coffee shop that all their friends frequent. That's a recipe for distraction (and embarrassment).

6. Keep their unique wiring in mind. Not all kids are the same, and that means not all kids will respond to the conversation in the same way. **Author Kathleen Edelman** encourages parents to learn their child's unique temperament and tailor their parenting styles to their kids' specific wiring. There is no one-size-fits-all approach because there is no one-size-fits-all kid. So remember, what works for one may not work for another, and that's okay.



7. Go side by side. Sitting across the table from your kid can feel confrontational. Consider going on a walk, doing an activity, or even sitting side by side in the car during intentional conversations, which can help lower the pressure.

8. Avoid euphemisms or unclear answers. Remember, most kids don't develop abstract reasoning until **around age 12 or after**. So if you talk to them in euphemisms or metaphors, they may not be able to understand exactly what you mean. For example, if you suggest the beloved family pet went to a better place upon their passing, your young kids may think they're still out there alive somewhere.



9. Think about your body language. Remember, your kids are not just listening to your words; they're also observing your body language. If you say you aren't angry at what they told you, but your face tells another story, your kid will likely believe your body language over your words. If you say you're comfortable with what they're telling you, but your body language is jittery and anxious, they'll know you aren't telling the truth.

10. Don't assume anything. A **Gallup poll shows** that 19% of teens surveyed wished their parents cared about or understood their feelings and opinions better. If we assume they don't care about a topic, that a topic isn't relevant to them, or that they already have enough knowledge to deal with it on their own, we'll miss the chance to dive deeper into the conversation and learn about their experience.

11. Manage your expectations. We've all run through conversations in our head and imagined a perfect ending. If you focus on the expected outcome rather than how the actual conversation goes, you'll likely end up disappointed. Do your best not to idealize how each part of the conversation will go. The ultimate goal, however each interaction goes, is to maintain a continual conversation that will happen in all kinds of ways with all kinds of responses as your kids grow.

12. Leave room for their questions. Questions are key to real connection and continual conversation. So, let your kid ask you questions. And be honest when you aren't sure how to respond and offer to come back to their question after you've had more time to think it over.

13. Ask some questions of your own. The goal is not to ask leading or intimidating questions, but questions that open the door for more thought, conversation, and connection. Open-ended questions like this can work wonders in conversation:

What's the best thing going on in your life right now?

What's the hardest thing you're dealing with right now?

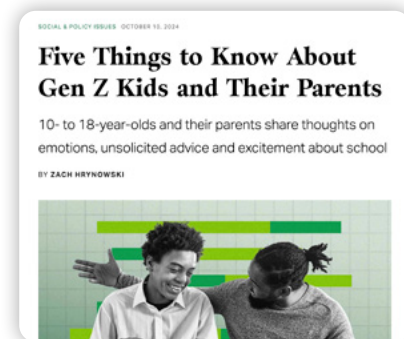
What's one thing going on with your friends or at school this week?

If you could ask any question about this topic, what would it be?

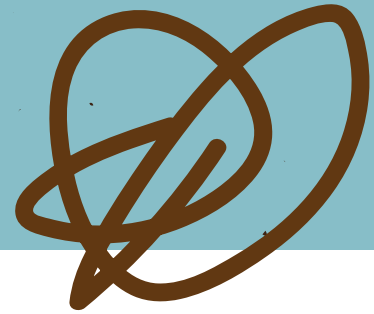
Do you have more questions about what we've talked about? What are they?

14. Ask for help. Consider who you already have in your corner to lean on for wisdom and support. When difficult topics come up, sharing your situation to get advice and encouragement from mentors, friends, family members, other parents, and/or professionals is an invaluable step for you in this process.

15. Keep praying. Frankly, prayer is really the best resource we have when it comes to raising our kids. Parenting requires so much wisdom—the kind only God can give. As you keep the conversation going with your kids, don't forget to carry that over to your conversations with God. Ask the Lord for wisdom to guide you as you talk to your kids. Pray for their ears and hearts to be open as they engage with you.



5 Big Topics to Cover in Conversation



Sex and Pornography

You don't need us to tell you that kids are being introduced to sexualized content at younger and younger ages. And the older they get, the more exposure they're likely to experience.

A survey done by Common Sense Media found that 73% of teens had seen pornography, with 54% reporting they were exposed to it by age 13 and 15% by age 11. Their research shows that exposure to pornography at a young age may be related to poor mental health, increased sexual aggression, relationship problems, and sexism as kids grow. **A study from the Center for Disease Control** found that about 40% of teens between 15 and 19 years old have had sexual intercourse. All this adds up to one big reality: We need to be talking to our kids about sex and pornography both early and often.



This doesn't mean we go into graphic detail with little children, but it's crucial that we set ourselves up as the primary influencers for how our kids understand this part of life. Psychologist Donna Wick **reminds** parents that kids are looking to them to engage in these conversations: "The way kids begin to build their internal sense of what's right and what's wrong is from their parents. So kids need to have these conversations with parents early in the game."

We might dread the thought of talking about these things with our kids—but if we don't, they're more likely to be secretive, confused, and potentially ashamed about the topics of sex and pornography. When we choose to push past our own fear and discomfort surrounding the subjects, we'll open a dialogue with our kids to educate them early, prepare them for challenging situations, and help them grow into people who have a healthy perspective and Biblical understanding of sex and all it encompasses.

THINK ABOUT THIS

- Talk to both boys and girls about the same topics.
- Start modeling and teaching consent at a young age in small ways.
- Use the appropriate names for body parts without embarrassment.
- Teach respect early on (both for their own bodies and boundaries as well as the bodies and boundaries of others).
- Remind them their curiosity is natural and nothing to be ashamed of.
- Let their questions guide where the conversation goes next.



Bullying

Bullying often starts when kids are young. Most children encounter bullying in **one of three ways**: as the bully, as the bullied, or as a witness to the bullying. While all three directly impact our kids in the moment, the effects of these experiences can stay with them well into adulthood. **Almost 20% of kids ages 12-18** experience bullying, with 2 in 3 of those kids saying they experience it multiple times a day. With the increase in technology and social media platforms, **about half of US teens (53%)** say they've experienced online harassment or some form of online bullying.

As parents, we want to engage the conversation proactively, especially as we send our kids to school, church, or other group activities where they may be bullied by other children (or may be the bully). If we don't address this topic, we run the risk of our kids not being able to discern for themselves how they should and shouldn't be treated by their peers—or we leave the door open for our kids to become the bully themselves. They need guidance to help them recognize what treatment is wrong, what they should do if they witness or experience it, and who is there to support them when they need help. As parents, you have the opportunity to do all of this as you guide your kids on what bullying is and what to do if they experience or witness it.

THINK ABOUT THIS

- Be clear about what behaviors and words should be considered unacceptable—both by your child or when directed at your child.
- Teach them that speaking up isn't a sign of weakness; it's a sign of strength.
- Identify other safe adults in their lives they can go to if they experience bullying in an environment that you're not in.
- Look out for signs and symptoms of potential bullying in their body language or responses.
- Incorporate discussion about online safety and bullying as well.

Death and Grief

A conversation about death with your kids can be tricky simply because it's hard to know when kids will deal with death in an up close and personal way. **The National Library of Medicine says** that children typically are exposed to death in one of three ways: a direct experience, a portrayal in media, or in parental communication. **Child psychologists and other grief experts** emphasize the importance of “talking to children about death from an early age in an honest and informative way.”

It's wise to prepare children for the concept of death before tragedy strikes. This gives them some age-appropriate context to begin dealing with bigger losses when they happen. **The National Library of Medicine** found that two major factors influence a child's understanding of death: the age at which they're capable of grasping it and the type of information parents provide for them about it.

That's why **researchers at St. Jude** encourage parents to talk about loss and model healthy grieving for your kids as best you can. This way, when they're forced to deal with death directly one day, you've already given them the context for the concept and an open door for the conversation to continue.



THINK ABOUT THIS

- Don't wait for your kids to experience death up close to start talking about it as a part of life.
- Model and talk about healthy coping mechanisms to manage grief when we need them.
- Encourage your kids to find their own outlets to process grief, like art, music, conversations with friends, or journaling.
- Point your children to the hope of heaven and the promise of eternity for those who believe in and follow Jesus.
- Give permission for all feelings, emotions, and responses to loss—as long as they don't involve harm to themselves or someone else.

Mental Health

This generation of kids is facing an increasing mental health crisis. Four in 10 pre-teens and teenagers **say** that feelings of loneliness come up at least monthly, while half of teens say they feel worried or anxious in that same timeframe. According to the **American Psychological Association**, only half of Gen Zers surveyed say they feel like they can manage their stress. With that, they're more likely to report a clinical mental health diagnosis, like anxiety or depression.

While Gen Alpha has been **described as** “more emotional, conscious, confident, and freer than their Gen Z counterparts,” that doesn't mean they aren't also vulnerable to the same mental health crisis called out as an “epidemic” by the Center for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC) and the American Association of Pediatricians. Because of that, most parents rank mental health as a “**primary concern**” for their young kids. Some adults working closely with Gen Alpha have indicated that they're “**already showing signs of depression.**”



That makes it all the more important to introduce your children to healthy coping mechanisms early on. Giving them the words to talk about what they may be feeling—and normalizing the entire spectrum of emotion—is a great place to start for younger kids. The more robust their emotional vocabulary, the better they'll be able to talk to you about what they're experiencing if and when emotional intensity increases.

And as a reminder, your kids are watching your example—so do your best to model care for your own mental health as well.

THINK ABOUT THIS

- Be open to pursuing additional help for your child should they need it, including counseling, mentoring, medication, or other treatment.
- Don't attempt to fix what they're feeling all the time; instead, simply listen and show support when they need to be heard.
- Remind them to look for the good, not as a distraction or cover up of what they're feeling but as a means to shift their focus to the positive from time to time.

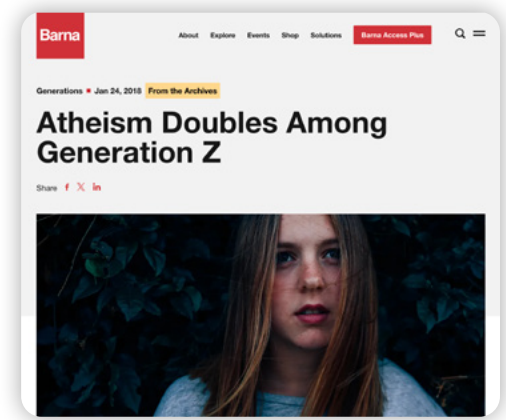


Faith

In an older study, **Barna concluded** that Gen Z is the “first truly ‘post-Christian generation,’” and they seem to be right. Gen Alpha seems to be following suit as **some 22%** say they’re non-religious. Though an estimated 66% of those **surveyed** claim Christianity as their faith, less than half see it as an important part of their everyday lives. With scandals involving abuse, financial crimes, and the misuse of power permeating churches and religious institutions, most kids are growing up in a world where they’re more likely to see the Christian church as flawed and its leaders as untrustworthy.

As Christian parents, one thing we want is to see our children grow and develop a faith of their own. In their 2021 book, **Handing Down the Faith**, authors Christian Smith and Amy Adamczyk point out that the single most powerful influence on the religious lives of teenagers is the religious lives of their parents. They elaborate: “Parents of American youth play the leading role in shaping the character of their religious and spiritual lives, well after they leave the home and often for the rest of their lives.”

While modeling the importance of faith can have an impact, the **most significant impact** on our kids comes from regularly talking about faith in everyday, ordinary circumstances. In other words, making faith a part of the One Conversation is essential.



THINK ABOUT THIS

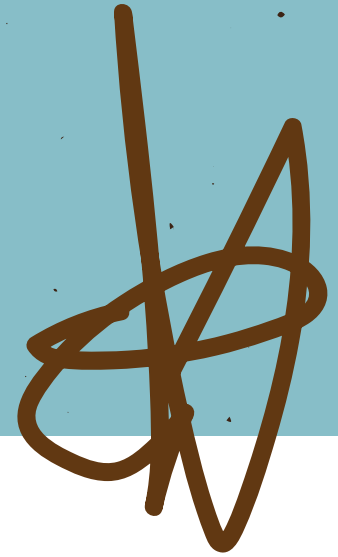
- Pray both with and for your kids starting at a young age.
- Make faith a natural part of your family’s everyday life.
- Let them ask questions as a sign of curiosity, interest, and a desire to understand what’s true.
- Give them room to express doubts, questions, and confusion about faith without always trying to immediately answer or alleviate their discomfort.
- Find ways for them to connect with other trusted Christian adults who can speak into and model this part of life for them, too.

Other Topics

You know your children, your family, and your circumstances best, so if there’s another tough topic (**abortion**, **LGBTQ+** issues, **smartphone** habits, **social media**, divorce, etc.) that you think needs to be addressed, we encourage you to use the same principles outlined here to talk about those topics too. While you don’t want to overwhelm, overinform, or potentially scare your children by diving into too many difficult topics at once, you do want them to know you’re willing and available to talk to them about the issues that can (and likely will) arise in their lives, culture, and world as they grow up.



Common Questions From Parents



“What if my kids are older, and I haven’t started the One Conversation yet? Is it too late?”

It’s never too late to start talking about things that matter. You can even acknowledge that you wish you’d started sooner. Your honesty and vulnerability may be the very thing your son or daughter needs to open up.

“What if I get it wrong?”

At some point, we are practically guaranteed to get it wrong. Have grace for yourself when those moments come. Apologies and humility can go a long way in rebuilding the connection and making space for the conversation to continue. Whatever you do, don’t give up. Even if you’re having these discussions imperfectly, you’re still showing up for your kid.

“How can I best reach my kid?”

As parents, you’re talking to kids who have grown up in a world dominated by the internet, smartphones, and social media. The presence of these technologies has impacted how they communicate. That means one great approach to reach our kids is to find ways to engage with and leverage new technologies to further the conversation. Be willing to connect with your kids in their preferred method. If they constantly text their friends, try texting them. If they love Snapchat, send them your own Snaps. If they are deep into YouTube, find videos relevant to the conversation and share them with your kid. Just remember to use these technologies as a supplement—and not a replacement—for face-to-face conversation.

“What goals do I need to keep in mind for myself?”

We encourage you to make listening actively, paying attention, and trying to understand into the top three goals of every difficult conversation you have with your kid. These goals aren’t focused on getting your kid to a specific outcome or perspective. Instead, they’re designed to help you craft your own conversational skills and relationship quality with your kids—dynamics that, in many cases, will make you and your own point of view more persuasive as a byproduct.

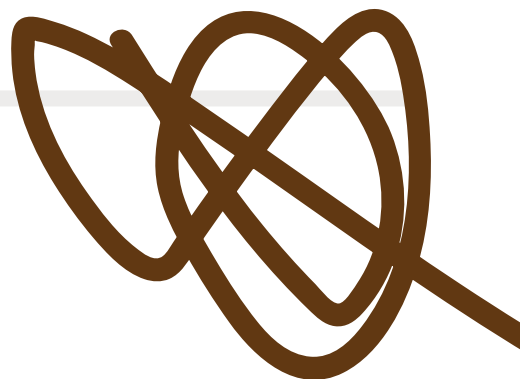


“How do I know my kid is really listening?”

At the end of the day, your kids have to make their own choices. At some point, those choices will mean they also have to deal with consequences. When that happens, it isn't a sign your kid isn't listening to what you've talked about together. It's simply a sign that they're a growing human in a broken world. If they make a decision that goes against what you've tried to share, don't give up on trying to understand them. As you correct them, also be quick to forgive, and available to keep the conversation going even when they mess up.

“How do I know the conversation is over?”

The idea of the One Conversation means that there is no finish line. Even when/if there are long gaps in between interactions, your kids still need the sort of wisdom, support, and guidance you have—even when they're grown. Of course, the way these conversations happen will need to change as they become adults (you're no longer their cop or coach, but more like their consultant). But deciding to intentionally open up topics of conversation now can make a huge difference for them now and throughout their lives.



Final Thoughts

As you think about your love for your kids and your desire to see them navigate this world in a healthy way, remember that you, too, have a loving Father who wants the same for you and your kids alike. So as you dive into difficult conversations with your kid over the course of their lives, remember that you're doing it with the support of the God who loves you both unconditionally. Let's show our children His love by intentionally disciplining them in conversation through some of the most painful and challenging aspects of their lives.

Recap

- Rather than something to fear, difficult conversations are opportunities for you to guide your kids through challenging issues.
- Instead of seeing these as one-and-done talks, make it your goal to maintain the One Conversation about these and other topics.
- You are the leading voice to shape their perspective and faith.
- Keep in mind that the time, place, and environment can help set the stage for good (or less good) conversations with your kids.
- While you can jump into conversations anytime, the best time to start is when they're young. Have these conversations early and often and continue speaking into your kids' lives even after they become adults.
- There are all kinds of issues your kids will face as they grow up, including topics like sex, death, bullying, mental health, and more. As their parent, you want to be the authoritative voice and safe space for them to ask questions, share experiences, and grow in confidence and knowledge about these things.
- There are a number of strategies for how to have these conversations well, but they all require humility, wisdom, honesty, and love.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Who is someone you feel comfortable talking to about anything? Why?

On a scale of 1 to 10, how comfortable do you feel talking to me about difficult or heavy topics?

What can I do to help you feel more at ease to have these conversations with me?

Are there topics you wished we discussed more openly? Share them with me!

What might make it easier for you to talk about difficult or awkward things?

What issues or challenges are you dealing with right now?

What questions has that challenge brought up for you?

How can I help you through that specific issue right now?

Is there anything you feel like you can't talk to me about? If so, what would it take for you to be willing to talk to me about that?

Even when I need to have a hard or disciplinary conversation with you, how can I help you remember that it's all because I love you and want what's best for you?

