

# Tough Talks for Katy Families

Five difficult conversations parents need to have with their kids, and how to know when to have them

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Talking to our kids is usually an enjoyable experience, but there are some topics that make many parents uneasy. Should you be the one to bring up these topics or wait for your child to approach the subject? Here are some of the most common tough talks as well as tips from the experts to help guide you.

## Body Parts

From as early as infancy, kids are interested in learning about their own bodies. They may notice the differences between boys and girls and be naturally curious. According to the experts, the best way to address this topic is to take a matter-of-fact approach. Use the correct names for body parts and answer questions openly and on the child's level of understanding. "Children will often take their cues from adults," says Katy child psychologist, Abigail Langan, MD. "If you feel uncomfortable discussing a topic and avoid it or dismiss it, your child will feel embarrassed to ask you for information. Therefore, they will look elsewhere - like friends or the Internet."

David Dotson, a licensed professional counselor with Houston Center for Christian Counseling, says he encourages parents to use correct names for body parts. "For years we referred to our boys' private parts as their

'business.' But once when they were told to, 'Keep their nose out of other people's business,' they were grossed out and completely confused," he laughs. "We used correct anatomical terms after that." Dotson says it's important to establish comfort when talking about our bodies from an early age but in an appropriate way. "When children are younger, ages 3 to 4, bath time affords a simple opportunity to talk about hygiene concerning body parts. As they get older, ages 4 to 7, the topic of modesty is a natural subject."

## The Sex Talk

One of the most feared topics of all is definitely the dreaded s-e-x talk. Starting from a young age, children will give you many opportunities to discuss this topic. Something as simple as a preschooler asking, "Where do babies come from?" or a first grader wanting to know "how does a baby get out of mommy's tummy," can lead to a discussion. Although it can be very uncomfortable for parents, it's important to answer questions honestly and in an age-appropriate way. "If, as parents, we are able to foster a sense of security in



our children, a feeling that they can ask us anything without feeling embarrassed or ashamed, many difficult topics can be covered,” says Langan.

Later, as a child begins junior high and high school, discussions will go deeper and address topics of importance such as abstinence, birth control, relationships, sexually transmitted diseases, and other vitally important topics. Many parents avoid discussing these for fear they will encourage teens to become sexually active, but statistics show the opposite may be true. In fact, providing accurate information before young people begin to have sex has been shown to help teens abstain from sex. There are many helpful books on this topic to assist parents in these difficult conversations, but parents should always read the book first before giving it to their child to read. Karen Jagers, a counselor at Stokan Jagers & Associates in Katy, suggests giving teens a book to read in private, but telling them you would like to discuss it together afterward. “If children are too embarrassed to ask questions, you can ask them to write down their questions and answer them later.”

## Death and Loss

Death can be as difficult to explain as it is to understand. Whether you have to discuss with your child why their grandmother is in the hospital or the loss of the long-time family pet, it is important to be honest and encourage questions. Let them know you do not have all the answers, but create an environment of comfort and openness. Send the message that there is no right or wrong way to feel.

“I believe grieving is an intentional process,” says Dotson. “We hear the saying, ‘time heals all wounds,’ but not addressing a painful situation with your child can actually create a wound. We need to walk along side our kids through grief by showing affection, asking them how they are doing, praying with them, or even helping them take action.”

Dotson points out that culture often discourages kids from attending funerals. “A funeral is a powerful ceremony that can be a tool in the grief process. It helps us see we are not alone in our grief and gives us an opportunity for a solemn and respectful farewell,” he adds.

When dealing with the loss of a pet, if you have to use euthanasia, be cautious about saying the animal went “to sleep” or “got put to sleep.” Young children sometimes interpret events literally, so this can conjure up scary misconceptions about sleep, surgery, and anesthesia. If the pet’s death is more sudden, calmly explain what happened, be brief, and let their questions guide how much information you provide.

## Drugs and Alcohol

Discussing drugs and alcohol with your child may not seem like the highest priority when they are young, but how your child approaches alcohol and drugs can have life-long effects and serious consequences. Studies have shown that

children ages 12 and 13 are most commonly exposed to this type of peer pressure, however some evidence now shows that they are being approached much younger.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, 19% of high school students admitted to drinking more than a few sips of alcohol before the age of 13. When asked if they’d had at least one drink of alcohol in their lifetime, that number jumps to 66%. Hands-on parenting is often seen as the most effective approach. Frequently discuss your family’s values and then make sure you are serving as their role model. Children mimic their parents’ behavior at an early age, and look to them in order to determine what responsible behavior is.

“If your son or daughter is feeling peer pressure about drugs or alcohol, tell them that you are going to start randomly drug and alcohol testing them,” suggests Jagers. “It’s a great deterrent and for the kids who truly aren’t interested but are being pressured. It usually only takes one ‘I can’t. My parents drug test me,’ to have them never asked again.”

## Divorce and Separation

As soon as you are certain about your plans, start discussions with your children about your decision to live apart. Keeping the news hidden will only build unnecessary tension. If possible, have both parents present for this conversation. It’s important to try to leave feelings of anger, guilt, or blame out of it and not share your adult issues with the children. Practice how you’re going to tell your kids so you don’t become upset or angry during the talk. “A primary goal should be to establish yourself as someone who is safe to talk to about anything,” advises Dotson. Don’t feel like you have to pour out every detail about difficult subjects all at once, but create an on-going atmosphere of safe conversation.” Although the discussion should be tailored to your children’s age, maturity, and temperament, be sure to convey that what happened between mom and dad, is not their fault, and that both parents still love them. Most kids will feel they are to blame even after parents have said that they are not, so it’s vital for parents to keep providing reassurance.

## Be Ready for Teachable Moments

It’s important for parents to prepare for these conversations and fortunately, there are many resources available. “Seeking reputable sources and arming yourself with knowledge should help to remove some of the embarrassment or discomfort some parents feel when discussing certain topics with their kids,” says Langan. Kids need straightforward facts and most importantly need to feel comfortable coming to you with embarrassing questions. “The best times to touch on these subjects are when life presents them to you,” advises Dotson. “Parents should capitalize on teachable moments.” **KM**

*KIRSTEN CORNELL is a lead associate editor for Katy Magazine. She wants to thank these Katy experts for taking time to help parents better navigate tough talks with their kids.*