

talking openly with kids



Talking Openly with Kids

**...facing today's
tough issues**



**Lutheran Hour
Ministries**

Bringing Christ to the Nations—and the Nations to the Church

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Thank you for reading this booklet. In the pages that follow you will learn practical ways to effectively share your values with your children. You will also read some of the wisdom God offers in the Bible to help families deal with difficulties in...

Talking Openly with Kids

Experiencing the birth of our children leaves us changed in indescribable ways. To hold our infant, knowing that this child is an extension of ourselves, goes beyond words. However, it is not long until we begin saying to ourselves, “Now what?” That “now what” feeling never leaves.

In fact, as our children grow, that feeling moves closer to a panic for many. As our children get older, we have less input into their lives.

The process of watching our children move into the world on their own frightens us. We wonder if we did it right. Our thoughts focus on what we could have done differently. The purpose of this booklet is really two-fold. First: it presents basic principles that provide you the opportunity to learn new skills and formulate new ideas on how to communicate with your children.

Each section will contain helpful information and practical ideas to help you and your child.

Second: this booklet is a means of validating your own parenting decisions. The vast majority of parents are doing the best they can with the resources at their disposal. They are parenting in the right way. It helps to be assured of that fact.

There are other resources available to you and your parenting efforts. These are found in the love of God in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the practical guidelines of parenting that He gives us in His Word, the Bible.

In the Bible we learn that children are His gifts to us as parents and that love and respect are of primary importance in family relationships. In Jesus Christ we receive and are able to offer the forgiveness that allows our relationship to continue, even when we have done wrong. It is that Christian perspective of love, respect, and forgiveness that is so often lacking in today's discussions.

This booklet can only introduce you to many of these ideas. It is not intended to provide a short course in Christian teaching. Suffice it to say that you and your child are important to God. He knows all that you are going through, He knows your joys, your sadness, and your struggles. If you would like to know more about what God has done for you and what He promises you today, please call the number at the back of this booklet.

(The following section, including the 13 essential rules of thumb for talking with kids about anything was taken from the booklet, “Talking with Kids About Tough Issues,” written by Lynne S. Dumas, author of “Talking with Your Child About a Troubled World,” prepared for The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and Children Now. Single, free copies of the booklet, “Talking with Kids About Tough Issues” are available by calling 1-800-CHILD-44.)

What You Need to Know Before Talking with Kids About Anything

Kids grow and learn according to their own timetable. At each age, particularly in the early years, they reach new and exciting developmental levels in their ability not only to move about and explore, but to think and react as well.

Before trying to discuss any complex issues with your child, it's important to refresh your memory about these developmental stages. That way, you're less likely to introduce a concept that is beyond the reach of your eight-year-old or too basic for your 12-year-old.

The Key Developmental Stages

Infancy

During the first year of life, babies begin to learn about their immediate world, their own bodies and whatever else they can touch, see, hear, smell, and feel. Infants also begin to build social bonds; when Mommy or Daddy smile at them, they respond, smiling and cooing in delight.

Toddlerhood

One-and two-year-olds are curious, intent on exploring anything within reach. They're also beginning to discover their independence, and their separateness from Mom or Dad.

The Preschool Years

Three-and four-year-olds see themselves as the center of the universe; if parents divorce and Dad moves out, the four-year-old is likely to believe, "Daddy left home because I was bad." Preschoolers also think in concrete terms. If a four-year-old learns that Uncle Jim has died, his first questions typically might be, "Well, where did he go?"

Emotionally, a preschooler's world is either black or white. If Mommy says no to something he wants, he may feel "all mad" at Mommy. He has a hard time understanding that he can be angry at Mommy and love her, too, or Mommy can be upset and love him at the same time.

Early School Age

Children ages five through seven are highly observant and curious, asking lots of questions in an ongoing effort to make rational sense of the world around them. Since they're beginning to see things from others' point of view, they also can be sympathetic and empathetic. And they can think about two concepts simultaneously; emotionally, that means they're able to understand that Mom and Dad always love them, even when they are punished for being naughty.

By age eight or so, school-age kids are capable of understanding fairly abstract concepts. Whereas a five-year-old may have difficulty grasping the finality of death, the nine-year-old understands that when someone dies, he will never return. Consequently, children in the eight-to 10-year-old age range may think and sometimes worry about the future. They may become more introspective; some start writing journals or keeping diaries. At this age, children move away from magical, "there's-a-monster-under-the-bed," fears and towards more reality-based anxieties like, "Will I pass the spelling test?" and, "Will my classmates like me?"

Eight-to 10-year-olds enjoy interactive play that allows them to demonstrate mastery over their burgeoning physical and intellectual skills. They are resourceful problem-solvers and often work hard at discovering successful solutions.

Pre-Adolescence

Children ages 11 and 12 can think abstractly about pretty complex issues. They are quite capable of thinking in hypothetical terms; they understand that if X were to happen, then Y would result. Children at this stage also have strong short-and long-term memory skills.

Pre-adolescents are also developing a stronger sense of self. They are highly introspective and concerned about their competence; this is the age when peer pressure begins to mount. They are able to feel deep sympathy for and empathy towards others.

Preteens also show great interest in what is happening to their bodies, including growth spurts, the appearance of facial and pubic hair, or onset of menstruation.

Thirteen Essential Rules of Thumb for Talking with Kids About Anything

While these developmental stages provide useful insights into how children grow and learn, they are not carved in stone. Each child develops at her own individual pace, and variations are perfectly normal. Nonetheless, understanding these stages helps us to communicate effectively with our children by neither overwhelming them with too much information nor underestimating their ability to grasp the complexities of today's world.

1. Create an open environment

Children have always been curious—but today, they seem to have so much more to be curious about. Movies, music, television, and events in their neighborhoods have exposed them to situations and ideas that pique their interest and trigger questions you never expected, particularly from children so young—questions like, “What’s safe sex?” or, “Why do some kids carry guns?”

Yet when it comes to such sensitive subjects as AIDS or violence, children will turn to you for answers only if they feel you will be receptive to their questions. It’s up to you, then, to create the kind of atmosphere in which your child can pose any questions —on any subject—freely and without fear of consequence.

How do you foster such an atmosphere? Be encouraging, supportive, and positively reinforcing. For example, if your child asks, “How many people have AIDS?” try not to answer with, “How do I know? Just eat your lunch!” No matter how busy you are at the time, respond with something like, “That’s an interesting question, but I’m not sure. Let’s look it up after lunch.” That way, you not only validate her curiosity but also leave the door open for more discussion later.

2. Consider your child’s temperament

Whether your child is easy going or fussy, outgoing or shy will affect the way you respond to his questions. Suppose you are watching the evening news with your child and a segment

about a burglary comes on. Your youngster, who tends to be a worrier, asks, “But what if that man comes here and tries to hurt us?” Responding with, “Oh, don’t worry about that,” will only make him more anxious because you are not taking his concerns seriously.

You have a better chance of calming his fears and opening communication if you say, “That burglary happened 50 miles away, so the chances that the same man will come all the way over here are pretty small. And remember that last year we worked with the police and started a neighborhood watch group? We did it to keep us all safe. And never forget that Mommy and Daddy will always do everything they can to protect you.”

3. Respect your child’s feelings

Allowing children to express their feelings openly will increase the chances that they’ll come to you whenever they have a problem. The child who cries because his big sister pushed his pet kitten off the sofa can be better handled by a brief word of comfort—”Kitty’s okay. She got a little scared, and your sister shouldn’t have been so rough, but she’s fine, see?”—than by an angry, “Don’t be such a baby. Nobody hurt you!” By legitimizing his feelings, you let him know that he’s an important person whose emotions count.

Respecting your child’s feelings will also help you understand when he’s had enough. Suppose you’re answering your nine-year-old’s question about AIDS. If after a while he says,

“I want to go out and play,” or “I don’t want to talk about this,” back off for now and reintroduce the subject at another time.

4. Understand the question

To avoid talking above the head of your youngster, first try to understand what he is asking and what he already knows. If, for instance, your child asks you what crack is, ask him what he thinks crack is. If he says, “I think it’s something you eat that makes you act funny,” then you have a sense of his level of understanding and can tailor your explanations to fit.

5. Always be honest

Whatever your child’s age, she deserves honest answers and explanations. That’s what strengthens your child’s capacity to trust. Also, when you don’t provide a straight forward answer, kids make up their own fantasy explanation which can often be more frightening than any real and honest response you could have offered.

6. If you don’t know something, admit it

Sometimes you might worry that if your children learn that you don’t know everything, they won’t look up to you. But that’s simply not true. Kids accept, “I don’t know,” and, “Let’s find out,”—and they’re better responses than any false or misleading facts.

You also don’t need to answer all questions immediately. If you’re negotiating a tricky turn in rush hour traffic when your nine-year-old

suddenly asks, “Mom, what’s a condom?” it’s perfectly okay to say something like, “That’s an important question, but with all this traffic, I can’t explain it now. Let’s talk later, after dinner.” And then make sure you do.

7. Don’t leave big gaps

While you may not want or need to share all the details of a particular situation or issue with your child, try not to leave big gaps, either. Children will fill in the blanks themselves and, in the process, generate a good deal of confusion and concern.

8. Use age-appropriate language

Always speak to your child in language she can understand. Trying to explain AIDS to a six-year-old with words like “transmission” and “transfusion” may not be as helpful as using simpler language. Unfortunately, there’s no rule that dictates which vocabulary is appropriate for which age; much depends on the individual youngster. The best technique: use simple, short words and straightforward explanations.

9. Get feedback

One of the best ways to figure out if your child has understood a certain subject is to ask. Let a little time pass after an important discussion, then ask him to tell you what he remembers about the conversation and what he understands. That way you can correct any misconceptions and fill in missing facts.

10. Be patient

As any parent or caregiver knows, it can feel like forever before your youngster gets his story out. As adults, we're tempted to finish the child's sentences for him, filling in words and phrases in an effort to hear the point sometime within this century. Well, resist the impulse. By listening patiently, you'll allow him to think at his own pace, and you'll convey the message that he's worthy of your time.

11. Say it again and again

Since most young children can only take in small bits of information at any one time, they won't learn all they need to know about a particular topic from a single discussion. Instead, they'll ask their questions again and again over time until they are able to absorb all they want to know. Such repetition is normal, so be prepared and tolerant. And don't be afraid to initiate discussion repeatedly either. Patience and persistence will serve your children well.

12. Give them your undivided attention

How many times do you answer your child's question while folding clothes, preparing for your next day's meeting, or pushing a shopping cart through the supermarket? For most parents caught up in the hectic routines of contemporary life, making eye contact and giving undivided attention to their children's concerns becomes an all too rare event.

Still, it's important to find time to talk with your youngster when you can look her in the eye. First, it adds more conviction to your message.

Second, it helps build self-esteem by letting her know that she's worthy of your undivided attention.

13. Speak separately to kids of different ages

If your children are widely spaced, it's best to talk with them separately, even about the same subject. The reason is that the children are at various developmental levels, so they need different information, have different sensitivities, and require a different vocabulary. What's more, older children often will dominate the discussion, which may inhibit the younger ones from speaking up.

If you've read through this quick course on child psychology, you're ready to move on. But as you explore the issues that follow—in whatever order you choose to explore them—try to remember the information you've learned here. It will serve you as you and your child get into the sensitive and complex subjects of the chapters ahead.

Effective Parenting Takes Work, Energy, and Practice!

One of the most challenging responsibilities and joys we have is the rearing of our children. People may think that parenting is an instinctively natural function of adult human beings. The truth is, effective parenting requires study and practice. It involves work and energy. It is the most important “job” we'll ever do. Parenting provides tremendous opportunity for personal growth and joy.

Gathering and sharing information often helps us decrease our anxiety about dealing with difficult situations. The better we know ourselves and our beliefs, the better equipped we will be to help our children understand their behaviors and establish their own beliefs.

Let's begin with a personal exercise. Since your beliefs, expectations, and attitudes determine how you deal with issues, you will find it helpful to examine what you believe children face as they move into the preteen and teenage years. Consider the following questions. You might want to put your thoughts down on paper for future reference.

What expectations do you have for your child during these years?

How do you view the world of preteens and teens today?

What are 4-5 issues that you think your child will face as a teen?

How do you feel your teen will react to peer pressure?

Where do you get most of your information about children and teens?

What kind of relationship did you have with your parents as a teenager?

How would you describe the relationship you have with your child?

If you wrote down notes, review them. Or just think about your responses once again. Were most of your answers positive or negative with regard to the preteen and teen years? Were your responses and expectations realistic?

If we believe that the teenage years will be filled with frustration and fighting, they probably will be. When parents expect the worst from their adolescent, they often get it. Some beliefs enhance the relationship, others limit it.

We tend to look for behaviors that prove our beliefs were right. Our beliefs drive the system and determine our perspectives. Understanding ourselves is very important before we begin the journey of teaching our children.

Childhood is a time of constant transformation. As children grow they become more independent. This is often interpreted by parents as rejection or rebellion.

Here are some helpful tips in talking with children:

- Listen with full attention—quietly and attentively, not with criticism or judgment. Maintain eye contact.
- Accept and respect their feelings. For example, “I can tell it made you feel sad when... ”
- Give information simply and concisely.

- Set limits on actions.
- Set limits on behaviors in love, not anger.
- Model behavior you would like to see.
- Use stories or news articles as avenues to discuss issues.
- Express your feelings without attacking your child's character. Watch the "put-downs." For example, say: "I'm disappointed with what you did," not "You are such an idiot!"
- Look for opportunities to see your child in a positive light. Encourage your child by mentioning specific things they are doing correctly.
- Use a language of forgiveness. Recognize that there will be times when you will fail your child and times when your child will fail you. Let your child see the strength in forgiveness.
- Watch for cues to signal when children like to talk. Riding alone with them in the car, meal time, bed time, playing a game, sharing quiet time.

This last point is a difficult one, and often a frightening one—to parents as well as children! Many people feel that their acceptance by others is based on their behavior: "As long as I do this, or don't do that, they will love me." This leads them to feel that if they fail a person, they will no longer be loved by the person.

What do you communicate to your children? Is your love for them tied to their never failing you? “If you ever _____ you are in so much trouble now!” What do you communicate when they do fail?

The Bible teaches that as humans we will fail. We fail one another and we fail God. The good news is that God never stops loving us. His love doesn't condone bad behavior or failures. He doesn't say, “Oh, that's OK. Kids will be kids.” He says, “I know you have done wrong. But I love you and I forgive you.”

Knowing and believing that message can set you free as a parent and make you a stronger parent. You are able to forgive yourself for the mistakes you have made and you can admit your failures to your children because you know that you have been forgiven. You can forgive your children too! By sharing this good news within your family, you can get beyond any guilt or shame that may keep your children from truly sharing their problems with you.

Let's look at several specific issues your child is dealing with or soon will be:

- Peer pressure
- Sexuality
- Drugs and alcohol
- Violence
- Depression and suicide
- Death and loss

Peer Pressure

Peer pressure has been around for generations. Here's one definition:

Pressure:

The feeling of being forced, persuaded or influenced by something.

Peer:

Someone who is about the same age; your friends.

Peer pressure can cause people of all ages to do things that they really don't believe in and wouldn't usually do. "Keeping up with neighbors," can be an adult form of peer pressure. The cars we drive, the things we do in our spare time, wanting things better for our children than we had are examples of adult peer pressure. During adolescence, this pressure intensifies, because establishing peer relationships is crucial.

Our children live in a complicated and different world. Choices can be difficult and confusing. Decisions about how they dress, how they treat their parents, drugs, alcohol, smoking, and sex, all are influenced by peers.

Over the years, experts have blamed peer pressure for everything from delinquency and drug abuse to conformity.

Here are some common myths about peer pressure:

Peers are always a bad influence. The fact is pressure can be positive; for example, pressure to achieve in school, to turn down drugs. The question is not whether they will feel pressure, but the kind of pressure they will feel.

Parents and peers are opposing forces.

As a general rule, adolescents tend to accept their parents' view on big issues (moral and religious), but follow their peers on matters of style (music, clothes, hair, etc.)

Peers negatively lead the adolescent.

The real question is not who is making the child go "bad," but why the child has chosen those people as friends.

Helping your adolescent deal with peer pressure:

Build self-control and self-esteem by helping adolescents discover their own special strengths and talents. Tell your children the things you really like about them!

Share situations that they might face and anticipate what choices might need to be made. Help your child find a response that feels comfortable among their peers and stays true to their values. Encourage your adolescent to anticipate difficult situations and plan ahead. There is a direct connection between how kids feel and how they behave. If you understand the

feeling, you have reached the root of the problem. If you focus only on the behavior, you will probably hear a response such as “You don’t understand!”

When possible, encourage your adolescent to form alliances with peers who share your values.

We hear a lot today about values and morals, but what does it mean? Do you know what your values are? What do you believe is right and wrong? Where did these ideas come from? Are these “absolutes,” meaning that they are right or wrong for everyone? Or does each person have to decide right and wrong for themselves?

Christians believe God has given a foundation of values to help center and guide us. God’s Word (the Bible) is where we find them. They are given clear expression in the Ten Commandments which can be found in the Bible in the book of Exodus, chapter 20, verses 1–17. These words of God reflect the value of human life, marriage, property, one another. These values give all of us the support and information needed to make difficult decisions in life.

Sexuality

This is a topic that is often uncomfortable for parents to address, but it is very important.

Hormones, hormones, hormones ... Adolescence is the start of true sexuality. Girls menstruate. Boys produce sperm. Both sexes begin to have sexual feelings. The sexual feelings brought on by the biological changes of adolescence are

unavoidable. Like it or not, these new adolescent changes affect their world for the rest of their lives.

All kinds of changes take place as your child becomes a preteen and then a teenager. These changes (physical, intellectual, psychological, and sexual) are very complex and move a child into the adult world.

People talk about sex more openly than ever before in our history. The news, TV programs, music, and the Internet are easily accessible to children. Teenagers have sex earlier and more frequently with numerous partners. This is a serious and scary phenomena for us as parents.

Several social factors have impacted changes in sexual moral standards:

1. Social pressures against premarital sex have dropped sharply.
2. Teenagers have more unsupervised time and more disposable income.
3. There is more exposure to pornography on the Internet, cable, videos, magazines, and books.
4. There is an increase in the number of cases of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Parents need to be their children's primary source of sex education information and their children's best advocates.

This will ensure that all information regarding biological and emotional changes are shared in a way that focuses on your family's positive values. The more informed your children are about their bodies, and the risks associated with certain behavior, the more empowered they will feel to make healthy choices for themselves. Limits and supervision help set positive standards.

The Bible contains stories about people who misused sex and suffered a variety of consequences. We also read of how God desires sex to be a part of the very special, intimate relationship between husband and wife.

Nature is unkind to adolescents. At the very time they begin to be attracted to the opposite sex, they are painfully self-conscious about their peers' opinions, pimples, growth spurts, and cracking voices. There aren't too many adults who would like to go through those times again! It can be a tough time for parents and kids!

The physical maturation process, with its sudden and powerful hormonal changes, causes mood swings. Don't take this as a personal attack! One minute you have a happy child on your hands, the next minute a challenging adult. Patience and more patience is needed.

Learning to think of oneself as a sexual being, dealing with sexual feelings, and enjoying a new kind of relationship with another human being are among the central developmental tasks of adolescence.

At a very young age children begin to receive many conflicting messages about sex and male-female relationships. These messages generally come from parents, peers, the media, music, advertising, and pornographic materials. Helping them develop attitudes toward sex and sexuality that are realistic, positive, and informed is a key task for parents.

James Jaccard, a psychology professor at the State University of New York-Albany, has conducted several studies, which have concluded that parents exercise a powerful influence over their teens' sexual behavior. Jaccard says, "I think one important message is that parents can make a difference. Many parents think adolescence is a time of parental rejection and that they have little influence on teenagers. It becomes very important for parents to open communication channels because they can have an impact."

It is very important as parents that we equip ourselves prior to talking to our children about their sexuality.

Rather than have one "talk" about sex with your child, the topic should be discussed periodically and talked about with frequent candor as often as needed. Before sitting down with your child, sit down with your spouse, a trusted friend, or by yourself and review the following questions:

Review your adolescent years.

How was sex discussed in your family?

Who told you about the “facts of life?”

Was the “talk” just the facts or did it include feelings, limits, and a discussion about expectations and right and wrong?

Do you wish you had been told differently? How?

What problems did you face?

Who was there to understand?

*What are **your** perspectives regarding sex, marriage, and the treatment of members of the opposite sex?*

The development of a healthy sexuality is a process. It may be helpful to discuss with your preteen the following ideas:

- What does it mean to be sexual?
- What does it mean to be responsible sexually?
- How do some people find it easier than others to control their sexuality?
- How does sexuality change relationships with people?
- Christians believe that a sense of responsibility to their bodies and respect for others lead them to avoid sexual activity outside of marriage. How do you feel about that?

Alcohol and Other Drugs

Alcohol and other drugs are prevalent in the world of children.

In some cases, a child's social life may center on alcohol and other drugs. In others, the alcohol and other drugs may be present and a choice is freely offered by the peers. Many children have the opportunity to experiment with alcohol or drugs. They are easily obtainable.

It is also more acceptable in today's society to drink. Some parents actually purchase alcohol for their teenagers and other and allow them to drink at home. Various drugs are available and accessible to preteens and teens. These drugs include everything from prescription and over-the-counter medications to chemicals in spray cans.

Illegal drugs are also available to many children. These drugs include marijuana, cocaine, crack cocaine, heroin, and any number of derivatives and combinations of drugs, legal and illegal.

When discussing drugs and alcohol, it is helpful to be familiar with several terms.

1. **Use:** Casual, social, or experimental consumption of a substance.
2. **Abuse:** Intentional use of a substance to alter the way the person feels. When the brain or other bodily function begins to change because of the drug, the body is experiencing an overdose of the drug. In other words, the body cannot process what is coming in quickly enough. Initially, the purpose is to feel “high” or “euphoric.”
3. **Addiction:** A physical and/or psychological change that signals the brain that the body needs that particular chemical. At this point, the drug is no longer used for getting high; it keeps the body from feeling bad. Somewhere between abuse and addiction, abusers lose control over how much of the substance is consumed. They cannot stop. Children become addicted to drugs of all kinds much more quickly than do adults.

Your personal view of drugs:

Drugs and alcohol have destroyed families. For many, alcohol is a highly charged, emotional issue. Before starting a discussion with your child about drugs or alcohol, take a minute to answer the following questions to help you understand your starting point.

What was your experience with alcohol/drugs as a preteen/teen?

If you choose to drink, are your limits reasonable?

What, if anything, do you need to change in your own life regarding alcohol or drugs to make you believable to your child?

What limits or rules would you expect your preteen/teen to follow?

How do you know if your child is drinking or using drugs? Watch for certain clues, some of which are obvious and some of which are not.

The obvious clues:

1. Unwillingness to talk to you.
2. Deliberate evasiveness when asked about activities.
3. General aloofness or defensiveness when you inquire about his/her activities.
4. Increased need for money.
5. Socializing with others who have a history of drug or alcohol abuse.
6. Previous abuse of alcohol/drugs.
7. Involvement with Law Enforcement (Driving Under the Influence, possession, tickets, curfew violation, disorderly conduct, etc.)

The not so obvious clues are harder to distinguish because they may be the result of normal developmental changes. However, here are some things to be aware of:

1. A change in friends.
2. A gradual or sudden drop in grades.
3. A change in relationships at home, school, or church.
4. A sudden or gradual shift from the child's normal mood.
5. A shift from the child's normal routine or activities.
6. A parental "instinct" that something is not right.

What do I do Now?

Don't wait! If you feel that your child is drinking or taking drugs, it will only get worse if you wait. To care for and protect your children is your responsibility, even if it irritates them.

Ask your child to join you in a comfortable room. Tell him or her that you love them and that you are meeting out of concern, not out of a need to punish. Be factual. Place any strong emotions on the back burner. Be prepared to hear the answer to your questions. Bear in mind that you are their only source of help. If you become the enemy or even distant, your child will be stuck having to choose between you or a peer group for support.

The following steps may be helpful when discussing your concerns with your child:

- Explain why you have this concern.
- Tell them what you know about the problem being addressed, but make it short.
- Now stop and listen. Do not interrupt. They will get to the point.
- If the child changes the subject in any way, tell them that you will be willing to talk about those issues as soon as this one is discussed.
- Hear what is being said. Be aware of the look on your face.

If it is an angry look, the conversation is probably over. If the look is one of concern, you may have an opportunity to learn how to help.

- If you sense that your child is experimenting, ask what he/she would like from you so that you can be the most helpful in stopping their use of drugs or alcohol.

If you sense that your child is involved deeply with drugs or alcohol, call a counselor or pastor. It will not be the first time that they have dealt with this issue and they will be able to recommend a source to help you. They can then provide support for you and your family as you deal with this issue.

Remember, in all of this you will find the strength to deal with whatever comes. Remember what we talked about in the first section of this booklet. Let your child know that your love for them is not dependent upon their behavior. You love them and want to help them deal with the problem.

Trust your parental instincts, but control your emotions and anger. Say what you feel in a way that lets your child know that it's safe to share their thoughts and feelings with you. Assure your child you will not do anything to harm him or her, you will do whatever it takes to help.

Violence

Violence has increased dramatically. This is especially noticeable in our schools and among our youth. At one time, disagreements resulted in harsh words and sometimes a physical fight. However, no one is exempt from the possibility of a knife or gun being involved in children's lives.

There is not one sole cause of increased violence but many factors that contribute to horrible acts of brutality.

Some of the most popular television programs are based on actual footage of violence. Music, video games, arcades, and movies contribute to violent behavior. It is so common that we become desensitized to others' pain.

This desensitization impacts children differently than adults. Adults have the ability to understand the full importance to the family, friends, church, and community when someone is the victim of violence. For the child, each act of violence is a singular act without impact on anyone but the victim.

Violence is the acting out of anger when frustration and conflict are unable to be resolved or controlled. The more skills your children have to resolve conflict and to deal with anger, the less likely they will be to use violence in solving issues, even emotionally charged ones.

Knowing Yourself

As parents, each of us has had different experiences, and therefore, different feelings toward violence. We tend to act toward others the way we were taught. It is hard to explain to your children what you want if you are not sure of your own feelings about violence. Is it OK to protect oneself? How violent is too violent if those around your child are violent? Under what conditions is violence acceptable? Use the following questions to guide you through an internal conversation. This conversation will help you reflect on what part violence has played in your relationships.

Was violence a part of your family as you were growing up?

How much violence is in your family at present?

Is violence used to try and solve problems, gain power, or to punish in your home?

When is violence acceptable and when is it not?

How do you handle conflict and frustrations?

What suggestions were given to you about the way conflict should be handled?

Did these suggestions work?

If after thinking through these questions, you feel that violence has played a significant role in your relationships, perhaps you may want to discuss this with your pastor or a counselor before speaking with your child.

Knowing Your Child

Children may abandon the way they were taught to act toward others. Whether it is violence or compassion, caring or self-centeredness, children sometimes simply set aside what they know to be the family's values. Questions like: "Why did they do that?" and "Where did that come from?" can usually be answered by one of the following reasons.

- They want to fit in.
- They are searching for a sense of control over their lives.
- They are scared and believe their "act" will protect them.

- They have no problem-solving skills to deal with conflict.
- They have no anger-management skills.
- They desire to “save face.”
- They are overwhelmed with hate or anger.

Talking to Your Child About Violence

It may be helpful to begin your conversation with questions like, “Are there times when you are afraid?” and “When you are afraid, what do you do differently?” Now is the time to listen!

When it is time, let your child know that you have been afraid and what you did to deal with your fear.

If your child has difficulty with anger and frustration, have them spend time with a counselor or pastor. Go with them, so that they understand your support, but give them privacy. Don't question them about what they spoke about privately with that person. Work with your child to learn new ways of handling anger and frustration so that you can practice together.

It will also be helpful to talk openly with your child about the role your values play in dealing with difficult situations. It is OK to expect your child to live up to the values that you have taught them.

Depression and Suicide

Two to three percent of children and teenagers are believed to be seriously depressed with some particular groups, such as teenage girls, showing even higher rates. The most common of mental illness, depression afflicts an estimated five percent of the population at large. An additional one percent suffers from manic depression (bipolar disorder), a condition characterized by wild mood swings.

Recent statistics demonstrate that suicide among preteens and teens continues to increase.

Change is probably the most prominent thing to look for in noticing how depression and suicide touches the life of a child. The typical preteen and teen can appear to have more mood changes in one hour than any other creature on earth. But depression is something more, something that is more internal than external. Suddenly this child can't get enough sleep or just can't sleep at all. You may see a sharp change in grades, or they can't concentrate. They don't derive pleasure anymore, they don't like to hang around friends anymore. Let's check your attitude about depression and suicide.

Answer the following questions:

What do you think children have to be depressed about?

What does it mean to be depressed?

How did you handle the sadness, trauma, and the stress of growing up as a preteen/teen?

How did you communicate and what were your behaviors like with others when you were sad, depressed, or felt alone?

How might your child reveal his anger, loneliness, sadness, or frustration?

Did you or someone close to you ever consider suicide?

How did they handle their suicidal thoughts?

What is your view toward people who consider suicide?

What is it about children today that they have to be depressed about?

Why is there such a tremendous torque on this generation?

While children today may not be growing up in the midst of the Great Depression, these questions blast at the root of a basic misunderstanding about depression in general and teen depression in particular.

The Great Depression

Clinical depression, not the intermittent blues everyone lapses into on occasion, needs not be related to an incident, like the loss of a loved one. There is some medical evidence that depression is physical, biochemical, and genetic in nature for many people. This would explain why some people suffer from the disease even if they have had non-traumatic childhoods. When a crisis does enter the life of a child it can trigger episodes of depression that can be crippling.

Often a clinician will ask, “Where does normal loss end and affective behavioral disorder start?” when observing a child for depression. If left untreated, depression can be life-threatening. The vast majority of suicide attempts reflect depressive feelings.

Obviously, adults and teens face different and unique stress factors in their lives. Far too often, adults dismiss child depression as immaturity, laziness, apathy, or rebellion. Figuring out the difference between depression and normal child/teen behavior can be difficult.

The important thing is communication. If a parent, grandparent, youth leader, or teacher observes significant changed behavior in a child, check it out with someone else who knows the individual. “Have you noticed any changes...?” “Does it seem that Sue is acting differently?” Teachers, counselors, friends, friends’ parents, etc. can be reliable sources

to determine the status of a child's depression. The more input parents have to help them talk to their child, the better.

While physical complaints such as constant headaches or stomach pains are a common sign of depression, sometimes it works the other way around too. It's possible a child's persistent depression signifies an undiagnosed medical problem. A check-up by a physician is a prerequisite for parents who think their child has been feeling depressed for a period of time. Get an appointment with a doctor who knows the child or teen.

While it may seem that there are better means of predicting depression today than a generation ago; there are several things that have contributed to increased depression. One idea is that family ties are weaker now, there's decreased contact in the neighborhood from a generation ago—in other words, fewer stable forces that children and teens feel they can rely on when times get tough. This allows youth to tend to gravitate toward peers in gangs and children with negative behaviors. At the same time, family life is more frenzied and children feel greater urgency to perform to high expectations.

Anger turned inward is one of the catch phrases often used to define depression and suicidal tendencies. Therapists say that when you can't get your anger out, when you feel uncomfortable directing it at the people you feel have hurt you, you tend to unleash it on

yourself. You might not feel it as anger at all they say, but as guilt, isolation, unworthiness, and sadness.

Take a quick inventory of your child:

1. How does your child express anger, hurt, disappointment, rejection?
2. To whom does your child talk freely about things that frustrate or anger him/her?
3. What are some things that irritate and anger your child more than normal?
4. How often is your child sad, withdrawn, or isolated from others?
5. Has your child often spoken or written about death, suicide, or sadness?

People frequently judge themselves from their own worth or from the viewpoint of others rather than from God. The Bible reminds us, “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name and you are mine...Do not be afraid, for I am with you...”

Anyone hit with depression, not the everyday blues that everyone deals with, but the feeling of isolation and loneliness over a period of time, will need attention and direction. They need to be reminded that God fixed their worth with the gift of

His Son. In Christ's death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead, by His grace, we are made heirs of His Kingdom. Children and teens need to know that they are an indispensable part of His body and that as a unique part of this special family, they are loved and cared for by a merciful God and Savior.

The most important, consistent, and effective message about our value comes from God's Word. It is the fact of the cross and the reality of the resurrection that gives people significance and strength, forgiveness and life.

If your child exhibits signs of depression, seek professional help. Intervention is vital. Stay calm, gather information, and make an appointment with a medical doctor. If the child or teen has talked about hurting himself, has written about hurting himself, or has made an attempt of suicide, contact a doctor or hospital as soon as possible. Take every attempt or threat of suicide seriously.

Allowing children and teens to learn a vocabulary for their feelings and find a positive way of expressing those emotions to others is a good place to start. This can take place in a number of ways, but a place to start is your pastor, youth leader, teacher, guidance counselor, or doctor. Sometimes and under certain circumstances medication may be prescribed.

Depressed children and teens are unlike “normal” ones in the following ways (according to the National Institute of Mental Health, most of the following symptoms would need to be present for at least a month before a diagnosis is appropriate):

Anxious or depressed mood; restlessness or self-deprecation; feelings of guilt; loss of interest or pleasure; loss of energy; inability to concentrate; sleep disturbances; diminished desire to take part in social activities; change of attitude toward school and/or poor school performance; aggressive behavior; loss of appetite or weight, or overeating or weight gain; recurrent thoughts or preoccupation with death or suicide; sudden change from unusual behavior; withdrawal from friends or family; preoccupation with physical complaints or symptoms; neglect of personal appearance in a normally well-groomed child; a change in types of friends; the use of drugs and/or alcohol; sexual promiscuity; an essay, notes, songs, or poetry mentioning death and despair.

There is hope for a teen touched by depression and suicide and you may be the only link in helping your child.

A child or teenager who battles with depression is searching for some light in their darkness. That light is the hope of Christ and the strength of His love.

Death and Loss

At times of crisis, adults want to create a loving, safe place for children, but sometimes it's hard to know what a child is thinking. And you may also feel uncomfortable talking about the loss and death, especially if the loss is also a source of grief for you, too.

Picture yourself as a child at the time of death or any major loss:

- You have all the sadness, fear, anger, and other emotions that adults have
- You don't have the vocabulary to express what you are thinking and feeling
- You have limited life experiences which leave you with little understanding of what is happening to you or how it fits into the larger context of life
- You assume that you are to blame in some way for the crisis or death!

That's the challenge children face when they experience grief and loss. Of course, you want to love and support your child during a difficult time, but you may find it hard to know how to help.

At times of crisis, adults usually fall back on the way *they* were taught to deal with loss. Some families encourage members to hurry and “get over it” or to “tough it out”

and deny the importance of the loss and its pain. Other families try to help everyone feel better by just ignoring the sadness and being as cheerful as possible. *How did your family deal with loss and grief when you were growing up?*

Death is often a difficult subject for families to deal with, but it's important to learn to talk to children about death and loss. It's helpful to respect the pain and sadness a child is feeling—even if you don't know how to take it away.

Children's perceptions about death are related to their developmental stages and, while every child develops at an individual rate, these descriptions provide a point of reference:

Infants and preschool children:

Infants will sense loss and pick up on the grief of a parent or caregiver. Preschool children usually see death as reversible, temporary, and impersonal. Watching cartoon characters tends to reinforce this notion.

Children ages 5 to 9 begin to realize that death is final and that all living things die, but they believe that through their own ingenuity and efforts, they will escape death. This age is marked by magical thinking: if you wish it, it happens. They may personify death as a skeleton or a monster who takes you away. They may have nightmares or believe that death is

contagious. Early grade-schoolers think dead people continue to do things like eat and drink, only do it in the sky.

Children 9 or 10 through adolescence begin to comprehend that death is irreversible, that all living things die, and that they, too, will die some day. They are very interested in exploring ideas about life and death, the meaning of life, and often ask questions about God and heaven. While teenagers and preteens realize that death is irreversible, and that all living things will some day die, they see themselves as invincible. Sometimes children and adolescents react to their fear of death by engaging in risky behavior and taking unnecessary chances with their lives, thinking that they can overcome their fears by confronting death and thus confirming their “control” over mortality.

Children need Assurance that:

- The death or loss was not their fault.
- There are caring, supportive adults who will talk to them about their loss and help them deal with their feelings and thoughts.
- They can honestly express their grief in their own way, even if it means crying, yelling, or being angry—and that some one will be there to maintain limits and control, even when they feel out of control.

- God forgives any sin or fault of theirs involved in the loss.
- It's okay and not unusual to feel angry with God—and God would like to hear about it personally from this child He loves so dearly.

Talking About Death

Long lectures or complicated responses to a child's questions will probably bore or confuse the child. Dr. Earl A. Grollman, an expert in children's grief, suggests that it's a good idea to explain death in terms of the *absence* of familiar life functions—when people die they do not breathe, eat, talk, think, or feel on this earth anymore; when dogs die they do not bark or run anymore; dead flowers do not grow or bloom anymore. Children learn through repetition and they may need to hear the same question answered several times. So if a child asks the same questions more than once, it doesn't mean that your answer wasn't useful or that the child wasn't listening. Children need time to understand new information and its importance.

Talking About God

Children will often ask questions that adults can't answer about God and life after death. It's okay to not have all the answers, and your child's questions can provide the

perfect opportunity to find the answers for yourself as well. A Christian pastor would consider it a privilege to sit down with you and your family to discuss death, life after death, and the hope and comfort that the Christian faith offers at a time of loss. If you would like help in locating a caring Christian pastor in your area, we would be glad to assist. Our phone number, address, and e-mail address can be found inside the back cover of this booklet.

Children deserve honest answers about God and heaven. It's a wonderful thing to be able to tell them that God protected and loved them even before they were born. What good news for them to know that God wants everyone to be His friend and live with Him forever! That's why Jesus died on the cross. It comforts adults and children alike to know that God is a loving, personal God. He cares about every problem we have and comforts us when we are in trouble so we can share that same comfort with others when they are troubled.

Children also need to know that God does not kill people, God does not make people get divorced, and God did not get a parent fired or cause a cousin to die of leukemia. Death is never "God's will," because God's original plan was that people would live forever. In fact, the Bible tells us that God grieves, too, when His loved ones die.

The Bible also tells us that God *allows* death and loss and He promises to draw us close and comfort us during those sad and difficult times. He assures us that nothing can separate us from His love.

Finally, as time passes, the child will re-interpret the loss in terms of his or her present life experiences. For example, if Dad died in a plane crash, a little child needs assurance of continued care and love. When the child is in grade school, he or she will miss Dad on Parents' Day. And as a teenager, Dad will be missed when getting a driver's license or making the varsity team. Other occasions to process the death of a parent will be at life's major milestones such as graduations, weddings, and births. This same re-interpretation process takes place for all life's losses and disasters: the meaning keeps changing for the child, so the child will need to talk about it many times as he or she grows and changes.

Putting It All Together

Children make it very clear that the most important relationship in their lives, especially in the face of their peers, is the relationship they have with their parents. The closer the relationship is with the parent, the more likely the child will handle a situation as their parent would.

Your guidance and support are invaluable gifts that you give to your growing child when dealing with them on issues.

However, far more important than what you do for your children is who you are to them. If they know you are one who genuinely cares for them, who loves them unconditionally, they will respond with warmth and love.

Helping children distinguish your use of discipline and your setting limits as a sign of caring and not just being “mean” seems like a difficult job. However, most children really do know the difference.

They know how much you care and how upset you become when they challenge your parenting. If they think you are being unreasonable, evaluate for a moment. If you need to change, admit it and change; if not, proceed as you planned.

Talking with your children involves more listening than speaking. As they move toward independence, we become scared. When we get scared, we become more rigid and quicker to speak and set new rules. The problem is that a child moving through pre-teen toward teenage years is working hard to leave the old rules. This makes the child angry and frustrated which leads to rigidity. The result is scared, angry, rigid people trying to protect themselves.

Watching your children grow into adults is as difficult for you as it is for them. Your life changed in untold ways when your child was born. All too soon they will be

on their own. You will have done everything that you know to do to allow them to grow into confident and competent adults. That is all that anyone can ask of you!

What If I do it Wrong?

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to talking to your child is the fear that you will make a mistake. If you make a mistake, apologize! Remember, parenting is a process and not a series of events. Making mistakes is inevitable. Turning those mistakes into powerful learning opportunities is the sign of a caring parent.

For the parent who knows of God's love for them in His Son, Jesus, this is the time when both sides will rely heavily on the forgiveness of the other and of God.

Knowing that God's love is at the heart of your relationship with your child makes it easier to say, "I'm sorry. Please forgive me!" It is easy because the parental mistakes that we make have been forgiven by Jesus. In turn, we pass on His forgiveness and love to our children.

You are not in this alone, although at times you might feel like the loneliest person on the planet. The God who loves **you** without condition is with you. In all of your interactions with your child, remember that Christ stands with His loving hand placed on the shoulder of each of you.

In Summary

Raising children can be scary, but it is also fun. Speaking with them in an honest way sets a pattern for them to be honest.

Learning about yourself helps you know what it is your children need to know.

It also helps you to understand how you need to approach them.

You might wish to consider the following Scripture passages that tell you what God has to say about some of the subjects discussed in this book:

- **God's forgiveness and ours:**
Ephesians chapter 4, verse 32
- **God's view of the intimate relationship between a husband and wife:**
Matthew chapter 19, verses 4–6; and 1 Corinthians chapter 6, verses 19 and 20
- **Substance abuse and addiction:**
Romans chapter 12, verses 1 and 2;
Ephesians chapter 5, verses 15–20
- **Violence:**
Matthew chapter 5, verses 38–47;
Ephesians chapter 4, verse 31
- **God's comfort at death:**
1 Thessalonians chapter 4, verses 13–14; Matthew chapter 5, verse 4;
John chapter 14, verses 1–6
- **God's love and care:**
Philippians chapter 4, verses 6–7;
1 Peter chapter 5, verse 7;
Romans chapter 8, verses 38–39;
John chapter 3, verse 16

If you do not have a Bible, please call, write, or e-mail us and we will be happy to provide you with one. Information on how to reach us can be found on the last page of this booklet.

PATIENCE

by Dr. Dale A. Meyer

Heavenly Father, do we cry to You the way our children cry to us? “Mom, Dad,” they are constantly saying. “We need...” and then it’s fill-in-the-blank. Always something: a ride here, \$5 there. “I’m bored;” always something. Our patience wears thin, real thin.

We should call to You the way they call to us. You, our Father, can give us the patience to be loving parents to our children. How patient You’ve been with us during these years when we’ve been learning about parenthood on the job. When we snapped at our children, when we were too busy for them, when we resented that they asked us for needs—in all those sins of parenting, You forgave and patiently bore with us.

Our children? They’re not ours, but Yours. You’ve put them in our care for a few brief years. Soon they’ll be off to college or work and we’ll have so much less opportunity to share Your love with them. Give us patience now, O Lord, to share Your love with our children. Soon they’ll be going their own way and we’ll miss hearing their non-stop call, “Mom, Dad!” With Your help, we can be more patient. Amen.

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Talking Openly with Kids

There are scores of books for new parents or parents of toddlers, but none of these will prepare you for communicating with your pre-teen on the issues of peer pressure, sex, drugs, violence, and death.

Recognizing the signs of trouble in your children as well as understanding your own nonverbal messages are two areas necessary for establishing effective communication patterns. This booklet offers practical advice on how and when to address these subjects with your children.



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