



By Gregory Ramey, PhD, child psychologist at Dayton Children's and *Dayton Daily News* columnist

## Part II - Uncomfortable conversations: Ten rules for engaging kids in uncomfortable conversations

Whether it is death, divorce, suicide or sexual identity, parents (and kids) avoid uncomfortable conversations.

**Here's how to engage your children in discussions that really matter:**

1. **Start early.** Talk with your kids as soon as their language develops during their toddler years. Don't ever tell them that they are too young to know something. Never ignore their questions or use words they can't understand as a way to avoid difficult topics.
2. **Do it often.** Bring up difficult topics often as a way to help kids feel comfortable talking about anything. Youngsters hear things at school or see things on TV that provide great material for conversations.
3. **Establish a habit.** I use mealtimes for these types of conversations with my family. At dinner there is an expectation that everyone contribute to a discussion about something interesting they heard, experienced or happened during the day.
4. **Talk about sensitive issues in front of your children.** It feels awkward to talk about cancer, financial problems or relationship problems in front of your children. There is a concern that you will increase their anxiety about such issues. Kids are much more aware of these issues than what most parents realize. Discussing these topics in your children's presence gives them permission to bring up their concerns and questions.
5. **Talk about others.** Many kids have a hard time talking about themselves, but can easily discuss how other children may feel about some issue.
6. **Involve your kids in adult conversations.** The goal is for your children to feel that you are willing to discuss any issue with them. Involve them in conversations by asking their opinions. If

you are talking about a coworker who is getting a divorce, ask your kids their thoughts about the impact on the children. Ask open-ended questions, typically beginning with "how" or "what." Summarize the main idea or feeling of what your child has said so that he feels you really understood his comments.

7. **Don't wait to be asked.** Kids have a hard time asking parents tough questions. Don't be reluctant to bring up a tough issue, and then be guided about your child's reaction about her level or interest and comfort.
8. **Always be honest.** Lying is toxic to real communication between parents and kids. If a child asks you a personal question that you don't want to discuss, it's fine to tell him that you'd rather not answer his question. Issues such as a parent's sexual history would typically fall into that category. You are entitled to your privacy, as is your child.
9. **Give yourself a timeout.** Kids have asked me some questions that I just don't know how to answer. I simply give myself a timeout to think about an appropriate answer. "John, that's a great question. Let me think about it a bit and I'll get back to you."
10. **Fix your mistakes.** You will sometimes say things that are incorrect, confusing or misleading. Don't be reluctant to go back to your child and give her a more accurate answer.

Gregory Ramey, Ph.D., is a child psychologist and vice president for outpatient services at The Children's Medical Center of Dayton. For more of his columns, visit [www.childrensdayton.org/ramey](http://www.childrensdayton.org/ramey).