

## Talking about Tough Topics

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As a grandparent, how do you talk to your grandkids about sexuality, abandonment, suicide, jail, drugs, and the illogical behaviors of their parents? How do you answer the tough questions they ask?

### Start Early

When children are young, they turn to their parents - or in the absence of parents - their grandparents for guidance. Once they reach the teen years, kids tend to depend more on friends, media, and others for information. Talk to your grandchildren before anyone else can confuse them with incorrect information that doesn't reflect the values you hope to convey.

### Tell the Truth

Kids ask lots of questions and deserve to be told the truth in bite-sized pieces. As you respond, think about the children who are asking the questions. How old are they? How much can they understand? What do they really want to know? When a three-year-old asks where babies come from, she just wants to know if she was hatched from an egg or a person. The answer may be as simple as, "You came from your Mommy's tummy."

The same is true when children ask difficult questions about their parents. "Where is my mom (or dad)?" "Why can't I live with my parents?" "Why doesn't dad ever come when he says he will?" When these tough questions arise, don't lie to children. They know when secrets are being kept from them. When they eventually find out the truth, they'll lose trust in you, because you have lied.

Answers will depend on their ages and maturity, how much contact they have with the parent, and what those relationships are like. If you don't know where the parent is, admit that you don't know. If the parent abuses drugs or alcohol and is unpredictable, let the child know that the parent has troubles now. Always reassure children that it isn't their fault. If a parent is in jail and your grandchild is too young to understand the concept of jail, you might say that Daddy has gone away and that you don't know when he'll be back.

### Initiate Conversations with Your Grandchild

Your grandchildren may not come to you with questions and concerns. They may get mixed messages from undesirable behaviors they see or hear when they're with a parent. You may need to start the conversation. Use TV and other media as conversation openers. If you and your 11-year-old granddaughter have just watched a TV show that included a plot about a teenage pregnancy, ask her what she thought of the program and if she agreed with the behavior. These kinds of questions can open up valuable discussion. Just make sure you use words the child can understand.

### Create an Open Environment

Young children want to know about difficult subjects. They will look to you if they feel you will be open and honest when answering their questions. How do you create that type of environment? Be encouraging, supportive, positive, and a good listener. If your grandchild asks you a question and you don't know the answer or you can't answer it at the moment, it is okay to delay the response. You might say something like, "That's an important question, but I'm driving in traffic and can't explain it right now. Let's talk later, after dinner." Then make sure you have that talk.

### Communicate Your Values

Raising your grandchildren may give you the chance to be the first person to talk with them about issues like drugs, violence or sex. Make your values clear to them. Research shows that children want and need moral guidance, so use everyday opportunities to talk with them. Talk often - once isn't enough.

Source: University of Illinois Extension: Parenting Again

<http://urbanext.illinois.edu/grandparents/index.cfm>