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ABSTRACT

Parents are challenged daily with a wide range of disturbing issues that are difficult for children to understand and for adults to explain. This booklet offers practical, concrete tips and techniques for talking easily and openly with 8- to 12-year-olds about sex, HIV/AIDS, violence, drugs, and alcohol. The book is divided into five parts. Part 1 contains 10 general tips for talking with kids: start early, initiate conversations with your child, initiate conversations about sex and relationships, create an open environment, communicate your values, listen to your child, try to be honest, be patient, use everyday opportunities to talk, and have several conversations about the same topic. Part 2 presents advice about talking about sex and relationships, including giving accurate and age-appropriate information and talking with children of the opposite sex. Part 3 concerns HIV/AIDS and suggests that parents present facts, foster self-esteem, put children's safety first, and be prepared to discuss death. Part 4 deals with violence and recommends that parents acknowledge children's fears and reassure them of their safety, convey strict rules about weapons, talk about gangs, monitor media and tone down the effects of violent media messages, set limits for children, and ask schools to teach conflict-resolution. Part 5 conveys advice about alcohol and drugs, including role playing how to say "no," setting a good example, discussing what makes a good friend, and seeking help if a problem is suspected. The booklet concludes with a list of organizational resources and readings for parents and children. (KB)

...before everyone else does.

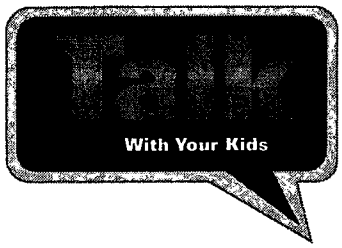
Talking With Kids About Tough Issues

A National Campaign to Support Parents by Children Now and the Kaiser Family Foundation

Children Now is a nonpartisan, independent voice for America's children. Using innovative research and communications strategies, Children Now promotes pioneering solutions to problems facing America's children. Recognized nationally for its policy expertise, up-to-date information on the status of children, and leading work with the media, Children Now focuses particular attention on the needs of children who are poor or at risk while working to improve conditions for all children by making them a top priority across the nation.

The Kaiser Family Foundation is a non-profit, independent, national health care philanthropy, not associated with Kaiser Permanente or Kaiser Industries. Established in 1948, the Foundation makes approximately $40 million in philanthropic expenditures each year, emphasizing efforts to improve the health and life chances of the disadvantaged. The Foundation serves as an independent, non-partisan source of facts and analysis for policy-makers, journalists, and the general public.

Lynne S. Dumas is the primary author of this parent guide. A parent-child communication specialist, Ms. Dumas has written numerous books including *"Talking With Your Child About a Troubled World,"* and is a member of the *Talking With Kids About Tough Issues* honorary committee.



...before everyone else does.

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Raising a child is probably the most gratifying job any of us will ever have — and one of the toughest. In large part, that's because times have changed. We live in an increasingly complex world that challenges us everyday with a wide range of disturbing issues that are difficult for children to understand and for adults to explain.

We believe this booklet can help. It offers practical, concrete tips and techniques for talking easily and openly with young children ages 8 to 12 about some very tough issues: sex, HIV/AIDS, violence, drugs and alcohol.

Some parents and caregivers may question the appropriateness of talking about such sensitive topics with young children. Maybe you're one of them. But consider this: our kids are already hearing about these issues from TV, movies, magazines and school friends. If we don't talk with them early and often — and answer their questions — they'll get their facts from someone else. And we'll have missed an important opportunity to offer our children information that's not only accurate, but also in sync with our own personal values and moral principles.

It's up to parents to create an atmosphere where children feel free to ask any question on any subject.

1. Start Early

Kids are hearing about and forced to cope with tough issues at increasingly early ages, often before they are ready to understand all aspects of these complicated ideas. Additionally, medical research and public health data tells us that when young children want information, advice and guidance, they turn to their parents first. Once they reach the teenage years, they tend to depend more on friends, the media and other outsiders for their information. As a parent, you have a wonderful opportunity to talk with your child about these issues *first*, before anyone else can confuse your child with incorrect information or explanations that lack the sense of values you want to instill. We need to take advantage of this "window of opportunity" with young children and talk with them earlier and more often, particularly about tough issues like sex, HIV/AIDS, violence, alcohol and drugs.

2. Initiate Conversations With Your Child

While we want our children to feel comfortable enough to come to us with any questions and concerns—and thus give us the opportunity to begin conversations—this doesn't always occur. That's why it's perfectly okay—at times even necessary—to begin the discussions ourselves. TV and other media are great tools for this. Say, for instance, that you and your 12-year-old are watching TV together and the program's plot includes a teenage pregnancy. After the show is over, ask your child what she thought of the program. Did she agree with how the teenagers behaved? Just one or two questions could help start a valuable discussion that comes from everyday circumstances and events.

Also, when speaking with your child, be sure to use words she can understand. Trying to explain AIDS to a 6-year-old with words like "transmission" and "transfusion" may not be as helpful as using simpler language. The best technique: use simple, short words and straightforward explanations.

If you have more than one child—and your kids are widely spaced—try to speak with them separately, even about the same subject. The reason? Children of varied ages are usually at different developmental levels, which means that they need different information, have different sensitivities and require a different vocabulary. What's more, older children will often dominate the discussion, which may prevent the younger ones from speaking up.

3. ...Even about Sex and Relationships

If you feel uncomfortable talking about such sensitive subjects—particularly sex and relationships—with your young child, you're not alone. Many parents feel awkward and uneasy, especially if they are anxious about the subject. But, for your kid's sake, try to overcome your nervousness and bring up the issue with your child. After all, our children are hearing about it both through the media and on the playground, and that information may not include the values that we want our kids to have.

4. Create an Open Environment

Young children want their parents to discuss difficult subjects with them. However, our kids will look to us for answers *only* if they feel we will be open to their questions. It's up to us to create the kind of atmosphere in which our children can ask any questions— on any subject—freely and without fear of consequence.

How do you create such an atmosphere? By being encouraging, supportive and positive. For example, if your child asks, "How many people have AIDS?" try not to answer with, "I don't know. Please just finish your lunch." No matter how busy you are respond with something like, "That's an interesting question, but I'm not sure. Let's go look it up." (FYI: Don't worry that if your children learn that you don't know everything, they won't look up to you.

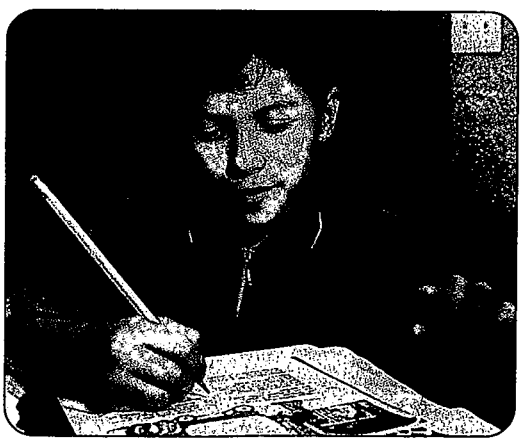
That's simply not true. Kids accept, "I don't know," and "let's go find out,"—and they are better responses than any inaccurate or misleading answers you may be tempted to offer.)

One more point: You don't need to answer all of your children's questions immediately. If your 10-year-old asks, "Mom, what's a condom?" while you're negotiating a tricky turn in rush-hour traffic, it's perfectly okay for you to say something like, "That's an important question. But with all this traffic, I can't explain right now. Let's talk later, after dinner." And make sure you do.

5. Communicate your values

As a parent, you have a wonderful opportunity to be the first person to talk with your child about tough issues like drugs and violence before anyone else can confuse him with "just-the-facts" explanations that lack the sense of values and moral principles you want to instill. Likewise, when talking with your child about sex, remember to talk about more than "the birds and the bees," and communicate your values. Remember: research shows that children want and need moral guidance from their moms and dads, so don't hesitate to make your beliefs clear.

Communicate Your Values



6. Listen to Your Child

How many times do we listen to our children while folding clothes, preparing for the next day's meeting, or pushing a shopping cart through the supermarket? While that's understandable, it's important to find time to give kids our undivided attention. Listening carefully to our children builds self-esteem by letting our youngsters know that they're important to us and can lead to valuable discussions about a wide variety of sensitive issues.

Listening carefully also helps us better understand what our children really want to know as well as what they already understand. And it keeps us from talking above our youngsters' heads and confusing them even further. For example, suppose your child asks you what crack is. Before you answer, ask him what he thinks it 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 adjust your explanations to fit.

Listening to our children and taking their feelings into account also helps us understand when they've had enough. Suppose you're answering your 9-year-old's questions about AIDS. If, after a while, he says, "I want to go out and play," stop the talk and re-introduce the subject at another time.

7. Try to be Honest

Whatever your children's age, they deserve honest answers and explanations. It's what strengthens our children's ability to trust. Also, when we don't provide a straightforward answer, kids make up their own fantasy explanations, which can be more frightening than any real, honest response we can offer.

"Me and a lot of boys think about one thing." Robert, Age 9

While we may not want or need to share all the details of a particular situation or issue with our child, try not to leave any big gaps either. When we do, children tend to fill in the blanks themselves, which can generate a good deal of confusion and concern.

8. Be Patient

Often it can feel like forever before a youngster gets his story out. As adults, we're tempted to finish the child's sentence for him, filling in words and phrases in an effort to hear the point sooner. Try to resist this impulse. By listening patiently, we allow our children to think at their own pace and we are letting them know that they are worthy of our time.

9. Use Everyday Opportunities to Talk

It's important to try to talk with your kids about tough issues often, but there isn't always time in the day to sit down for a long talk. Also, kids tend to resist formal discussions about today's toughest issues, often categorizing them as just another lecture from mom and dad. But if we use "talk opportunities," moments that arise in everyday life, as occasions for discussion, our children will be a lot less likely to tune us out. For instance, a newspaper item about a child expelled from school for carrying a gun to class can help you start a discussion on guns and violence. A public service TV commercial can give you an opportunity to talk about AIDS.

Everyday Opportunities

10. Talk About 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. That's why it's important to let a little time pass, then ask the child to tell you what she remembers about your conversation. This will help you correct any misconceptions and fill in missing facts.

Talk Again and Again

Finally, in an effort to absorb all they want to know, children often ask questions again and again over time—which can test any parent's nerves. But such repetition is perfectly normal, so be prepared and tolerant. Don't be afraid to initiate discussions repeatedly, either. Patience and persistence will serve you and your child well.

Listening carefully to our children builds self-esteem by letting our youngsters know that they're important to us.

Most parents want to do their best in talking with their kids about sex and sexuality, but we're often not sure how to begin. Here's our advice:

• Explore your own attitudes

Studies show that kids who feel they can talk with their parents about sex— because their moms and dads speak openly and listen carefully to them— are less likely to engage in high-risk behavior as teens than kids who do not feel they can talk with their parents about the subject. So explore your feelings about sex. If you are very uncomfortable with the subject, read some books (see Readings for Parents) and discuss your feelings with a trusted friend, relative, physician, or clergy member. The more you examine the subject, the more confident you'll feel discussing it.

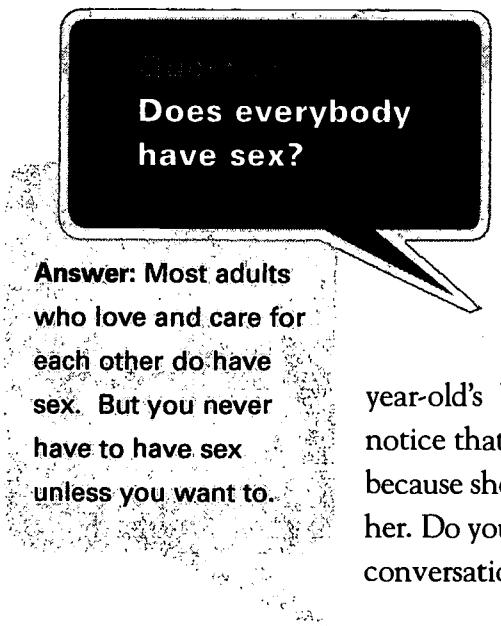
Even if you can't quite overcome your discomfort, don't worry about admitting it to your kids. It's okay to say something like, "You know, I'm uncomfortable talking about sex

"I know probably as much as you [adults] know about sex. That much." Alexis, Age 13

because my parents never talked with me about it. But I want us to be able to talk about anything—including sex—so please come to me if you have any questions. And if I don't know the answer, I'll find out."

• Start early

Teaching your children about sex demands a gentle, continuous flow of information that should begin as early as possible—for instance, when teaching your toddler where his nose and toes are, include "this is your penis" or "this is your vagina" in your talks. As your child grows, you can continue her education by adding more materials gradually until she understands the subject well.



• Take the initiative

If your child hasn't started asking questions about sex, look for a good opportunity to bring it up. Say, for instance, the mother of an 8-year-old's best friend is pregnant. You can say, "Did you notice that David's mommy's tummy is getting bigger? That's because she's going to have a baby and she's carrying it inside her. Do you know how the baby got inside her?" then let the conversation move from there.

• Talk about more than the "Birds and the Bees"

While our children need to know the biological facts about sex, they also need to understand that sexual relationships involve caring, concern and responsibility. By discussing the emotional aspect of a sexual relationship with your

child, she will be better informed to make decisions later on and to resist peer pressure. If your child is a pre-teen, you need to include some message about the responsibilities and consequences of sexual activity. Conversations with 11 and 12-year-olds, for example, should include talks about unwanted pregnancy and how they can protect themselves.

One aspect that many parents overlook when discussing sex with their child is dating. As opposed to movies, where two people meet and later end up in bed together, in real life there is time to get to know each other—time to hold hands, go bowling, see a movie, or just talk. Children need to know that this is an important part of a caring relationship.

• Give accurate, age-appropriate information

Talk about sex in a way that fits the age and stage of your child. If your 8-year-old asks why boys and girls change so much physically as they grow, you can say something like, "The body has special chemicals called hormones that tell it whether to become a boy or a girl. A boy has a penis and testicles, and when he grows older his voice gets lower and he gets more hair on his body. A girl has a vulva and vagina, and when she gets older she grows breasts and her hips grow rounder.

• Anticipate the next stage of development

Children can get frightened and confused by the sudden changes their bodies begin to go through as they reach puberty. To help stop any anxiety, talk with your kids not only about their current stage of development but about the next stage, too. An 8-year-old girl is old enough to learn about menstruation, just as a boy that age is ready to learn how his body will change.

• Communicate your values

It's our responsibility to let our children know our values about sex. Although they may not adopt these values as they mature, at least they'll be aware of them as they struggle to figure out how they feel and want to behave.

• Talk with your child of the opposite sex

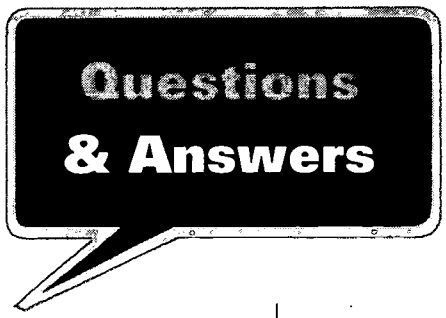
Some parents feel uncomfortable talking with their child about topics like sex if the youngster is of the opposite gender. While that's certainly understandable, don't let it become an excuse to close off conversation. If you're a single mother of a son, for example, you can turn to books to help guide you or ask your doctor for some advice on how to bring up the topic with your child. You could also recruit an uncle or other close male friend or relative to discuss the subject with your child, provided there is already good, open communication between them. If there are two parents in the household, it might feel less awkward to have the dad talk with the boy and the mom with the girl. That's not a hard and fast rule, though. If you're comfortable talking with either sons or daughters, go right ahead. Just make sure that gender differences *don't* make subjects like sex taboo.

• Relax

Don't worry about knowing all the answers to your children's questions; what you know is a lot less important than how you respond. If you can convey the message that no subject, including sex, is forbidden in your home, you'll be doing just fine.

What's safe sex?

If two people have sexual intercourse, and one of them has HIV or another sexually transmitted disease, he could give it to his partner(s). Doctors believe that if the man wears a latex condom whenever he has intercourse, it helps to protect him and his partner from giving each other HIV. That's why people call sexual intercourse with a latex condom "safe sex."



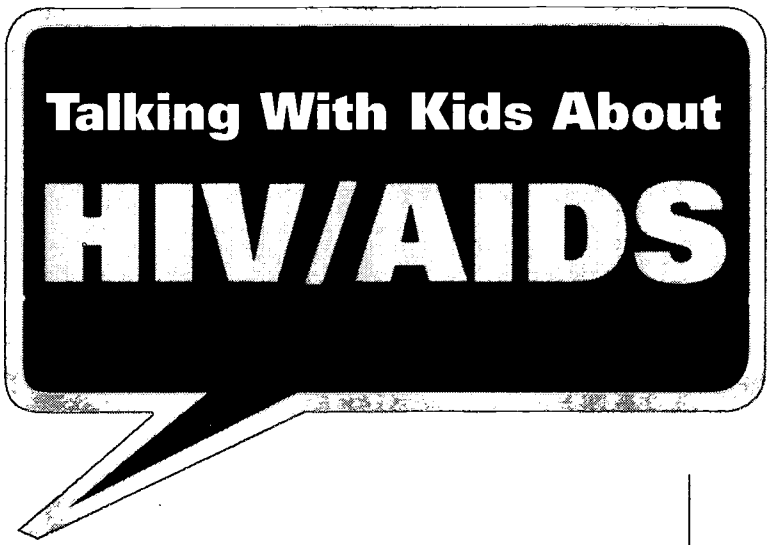
Is it true that you can't get pregnant the first time that you have sex?

No. You can get pregnant anytime you have sexual intercourse. Wearing a latex condom, taking birth control pills, or using other contraceptives are very effective at preventing pregnancy. However, the only absolute way to not get pregnant is to not have sex at all. *You might also use this question as an opportunity to point out that not having sexual intercourse is a good idea for teens. Help them understand there are other ways to show affection.*

"My dad, he's, ummm...too embarrassed about talking about it...about sex."

Neil , Age 11

As a parent, you have a wonderful opportunity to talk with your child early, before anyone else can confuse your child with incorrect information or explanations that lack the sense of values you want to instill.



As upsetting and confusing as it can be to bring up the subject of AIDS with young children, it's essential to do so. By the time they reach third grade, research shows that as many as 93 percent of children have already heard about the illness. Yet, while kids are hearing about HIV/AIDS early on, what they are learning is often inaccurate and frightening. You can set the record straight—*if* you know the facts yourself. HIV is transmitted from person to person through contact with blood, semen, vaginal fluid, or breast milk. HIV can be prevented by using latex condoms during sex, not sharing "drug needles," and avoiding contact with another person's bodily fluids. So stay informed. Sharing this information with your youngster can keep her safe and calm her fears. Finally, talking with your child about AIDS lays the groundwork for any future conversations about AIDS-preventative behavior. Here are some tips on how to get started:

• Initiate discussion

Use a "talk opportunity" to introduce the subject of AIDS to your child. For example, try tying a discussion into something your child sees or hears, such as a commercial about AIDS. After you and your child watch the ad, say something like, "Have you heard about AIDS before? Well, what do you think AIDS is?" This way, you can figure out what she already understands and work from there.

• Present the facts

Offer honest, accurate information that's appropriate to a child's age and development. To an 8-year-old you might say, "AIDS is a disease that makes people very sick. It's caused by a virus, called HIV, which is a tiny germ." An older child can absorb more detailed information: "Your body is made up of billions of cells. Some of these cells, called T-cells, help your body stay healthy by fighting off disease. But if you get a virus called HIV, that virus kills the T-cells. Over time, the body can't fight disease any more and that person has AIDS." Preteens should also understand how condoms could help protect people from getting AIDS and that the disease can be transmitted between persons who share drug needles. (If you have already explained sexual intercourse to your children, you might add, "During sexual intercourse, the semen from the man's body goes into the woman's body. That semen can carry HIV." If you have not yet talked about sex, don't bring it up during initial discussions about AIDS. It's not a good idea for your child's first information about sex to be associated with such a serious disease.)

Question:
Does everybody who gets AIDS die?

Answer: Today, there is still no cure for AIDS. With new medicines, some people who get AIDS can live for years and years. But until doctors find a cure, AIDS remains a deadly disease.

• Set them straight

Children's misconceptions about AIDS can be pretty scary, so it's important to correct them as soon as possible.

Suppose your 8-year-old comes home from school one day, tearful because she fell down on the playground, scraped her knee and started bleeding—and the other kids told her she would get AIDS. As a parent, you might explain, "No, you don't have AIDS. You're fine. You can't get AIDS from scraping your knee. The way you can get AIDS is when the fluids from your body mix with those of someone who has AIDS. Do you understand?" After such a discussion, it's also wise to check back with your child and see what she remembers. *Understanding AIDS, particularly for young children, takes more than a single conversation.*

• Foster self-esteem

Praising our children frequently, setting realistic goals and keeping up with their interests are an effective way to build self-esteem. And that's important, because when kids feel good about themselves, they are much more likely to withstand peer pressure to have sex before they are ready, or to not do drugs. In short, they are less likely to engage in behavior that could put them at risk for AIDS.

• Put Your Child's Safety First

Some adults mistakenly believe that AIDS is only a disease

of homosexuals. Whatever your beliefs, try not to let your opinions or feelings prevent you from giving your child the facts about AIDS and its transmission—it's information that's essential to their health and safety.

• Be prepared to discuss death

When talking with your kids about AIDS, questions about death may come up. So get ready to answer them by reading books (see Readings for Children and Parents) available at libraries or bookstores. In the meantime, here are three helpful tips:

—*Explain death in simple terms.* Explain that when someone dies, they don't breathe, or eat, or feel hungry or cold, and you won't see them again. Although very young children won't be able to understand such finality, that's okay. Just be patient and repeat the message whenever appropriate.

—*Never explain death in terms of sleep.* It may make your child worry that if he falls asleep, he'll never wake up.

—*Offer reassurance.* If appropriate, tell your child that you are not going to die from AIDS and that he won't either. Stress that while AIDS is serious, it is preventable.

Questions & Answers

What is AIDS?

AIDS is a very serious disease that is caused by a tiny germ called a virus. When you are healthy, your body can fight off diseases, like Superman fighting the bad guys. Even if you do get sick, your body can fight the germs and make you well again. But when you have AIDS, your body cannot protect you. That's why people with AIDS get very sick.

How do you get AIDS?

You can get AIDS when the fluids from your body mix with those of someone who has AIDS. You can't catch it like the flu and you can't get it just by touching or being near someone with AIDS, so you and I don't have to worry about getting it. (NOTE: If you have already talked

with your child about sex, you should also add, "You can also get AIDS by having unprotected sexual intercourse with someone who has the HIV virus.")

Can kids get AIDS?

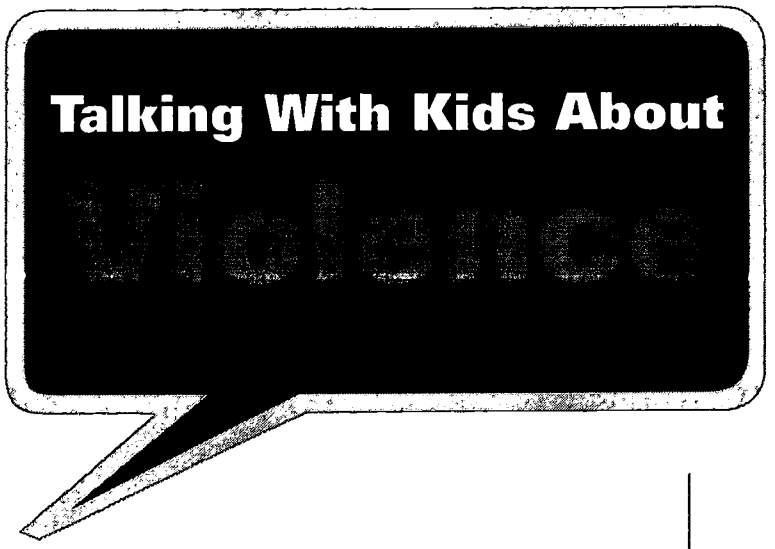
Very few children get AIDS. But if they were born to a mommy who had AIDS, they could get AIDS when they were born. A long time ago, some kids who had hemophilia—a disease that means their blood doesn't have enough good cells, so they need to get blood from other people — got AIDS when they got blood. But that doesn't happen anymore. AIDS is mostly a disease of grownups. (NOTE: If your child already knows about the link between sex and AIDS, and IV drug use and AIDS, you might also add, "Sometimes teenagers who have unprotected sex or who share drug needles get AIDS." But you should still emphasize that "AIDS is mostly a disease of grown-ups.")

How can you tell from looking at someone if they have AIDS?

You can't. Anyone, regardless of what they look like, can have AIDS. People find out if they have AIDS after being tested by a doctor. Therefore, the only way to know if someone has AIDS is to ask him if he has been tested and if the test results were positive for HIV/AIDS.

Do all gay people get AIDS?

No. Homosexuals get AIDS the same way that heterosexuals do. And they can protect themselves the same way, too.



The images of violence in today's world—in the media, in our neighborhoods and even in our schools—can make our children feel frightened, unsafe and insecure. Yet, there's hope. Even in such violent times, parents have the ability to raise healthy, confident, secure children who know how to resolve conflicts peaceably and make smart decisions to protect themselves. Here are some effective techniques:

• Acknowledge your children's fears and reassure them of their safety

Children who have experienced or witnessed violence firsthand, as well as those who have only seen violent acts on TV or in the movies, may become anxious and fearful. That's why it's important to reassure a child that their personal world will remain safe. Try saying something like this to your 7 or 8-year-old: "I know that you feel a little scared by what you saw on the news, but

you'll be fine. I am here to protect you and take care of you just like always." An older child of 10 or 11 might be comforted by a few additional details: "Dad and I aren't the only ones who are watching over you. Adults in your community like neighbors, the police and teachers are all looking out for your safety."

Question:
In the movies, guys like Steven Seagal and Arnold Schwarzenegger fight all the time and everybody says they're heroes. How come?

Answer: The people you mentioned are actors playing a part; if they acted like that in real life, they'd probably be in jail or dead. I don't think anyone who relies on violence all the time is very smart or brave at all.

• Convey strict rules about weapons

Teach your child that real guns and knives are very dangerous and that they can hurt and even kill people. You might say, " I know that in the cartoons you watch, and the video and computer games you play, the characters are always shooting each other. They never get hurt; they just pop up again later, like nothing ever happened. But in real life, someone who gets shot will be seriously hurt; sometimes they even die. So if you ever see a gun anywhere, like at a friend's house or in the schoolyard, never touch it. Instead, tell an adult, like your mom, dad, or a teacher, right away. That way you'll stay safe and help make sure no one else gets hurt *either*."

• Talk about gangs

If you believe your child might be exposed—or attracted—to a gang, talk about it together. Look for an opportunity—say you see an ad for a movie that makes gang life seem glamorous—and say, "You know, sometimes it seems like joining a gang might be cool. But it's not. Kids in gangs get hurt; some even get killed because they try to solve their problems through violence. Really smart kids choose friends who are fun to be with and who won't put them in any danger."

◦ Control your own behavior

When it comes to learning how to behave, children often follow their parents' lead—which is why it's important to

examine how you approach conflict. Do you use violence to settle arguments? When you're angry, do you yell or use physical force? If you want your child to avoid violence, model the right behavior for him.

• Encourage them to talk it out

Children feel better when they talk about their feelings. It lifts the burden of having to face their fears all alone and offers an emotional release. If you sense that a violent event (whether real or fictional) has upset your youngster, you might say something like, "That TV program we saw seemed pretty scary to me. What did you think about it?" and see where the conversation leads.

• Monitor the media

Both the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Psychological Association say that violence in the media can foster violence in real life. Watching lots of violent TV shows and movies—and playing violent video games—can desensitize our children and encourage them to commit their own aggressive acts.

• Parents can help tone down the effect of these violent messages by:

- Actively supervising your child's exposure to all forms of media violence.
- Limit TV viewing to those programs you feel are appropriate.
- Be selective about which movies your child sees and which video and computer game he plays.
- Counterbalance the violent message your child gets. For example, if you are watching a movie with your 9-year-old and a violent scene comes on, afterwards you might say, "Did you see that man get shot? I know he's a bad guy and this is just make-believe. But in real life people who get shot may have families and children, and when they die it's very sad. Movies don't tell you that part though."

- Establish rules about the Internet by going on-line together to choose sites that are appropriate and fun for your child.
- Consider any monitoring tools for TV and the Internet, like the v-chip, a new technology for TV.
- Take advantage of the ratings system that allows parents to block violent programs on their TV.

• Take a stand

Don't cave in to your children's assertion that "Everybody else does it (or has seen it)" when it comes to allowing them to play an excessively violent game or to watch an inappropriate movie. You have a right and responsibility to say, "I don't like the message that game sends. Violence is bad and hurts people, but that game makes violence seem like fun. I know that you play that game at your friend's house, but I don't want it played in our house."

• Set limits regarding children's actions towards others

Let your children know that violent behavior is not permitted in your family. For instance, if you see your child strike another, impose a "time out." Once she calms down, invite her to explain why she smacked the child, but tell her firmly that "hitting is not allowed." Then help her figure out a peaceful way to settle the problem.

• Hold family meetings

Regularly scheduled family meetings can provide children—and us—with an acceptable place to talk about complaints and share opinions. Just be sure that everyone gets a chance to speak. And no name-calling allowed!

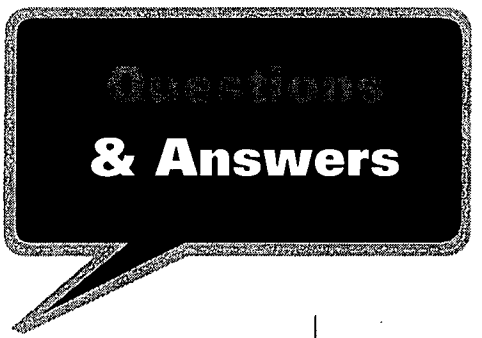
• Talk with other parents

Help give your kids a consistent anti-violence message by speaking with the parents of your kids' friends and coming to an agreement about what your children can and cannot view or play in your homes.

Also important: Ask other parents if there's a gun in their home. If there is, talk with them to make sure they've taken the necessary safety measures. Having this kind of conversation may seem a little awkward, but keep this in mind: The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatrists reports that nearly 40 percent of accidental handgun shootings of children under 16 occur in the homes of friends and relatives. So start talking today!

• Ask the schools to get involved

Encourage your child's school to teach conflict-resolution skills and to offer "peer mediation" programs (where children counsel other children). Train teachers in de-escalating and preventing violence.



Is it ever okay to fight?

Usually it is not okay to fight because, in most situations, there are better ways to handle an argument, like talking things out so you can understand how the other person feels and he can understand how you feel. I know that if somebody hits you first, it's hard not to hit back. The trouble is that violence just goes on and on—he hits you, you hit him, then he hits you and so on and the problem never gets resolved. The best thing to do is to walk away until both of you cool off, then try to figure out a solution together.

Peter got a cool toy gun for his birthday. It looks so real. Will you buy me one?

Your dad and I think that playing and pretending are important things for kids to do. But toy guns can look very real and can scare people—and that can be very dangerous for kids. So in our family, we don't allow any guns, including toy ones.

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. Patience and persistence will serve you and your child well.

The issue of drugs can be very confusing to young children. If drugs are so dangerous, then why is the family medicine cabinet full of them? And why do TV, movies, music and advertising often make drug and alcohol use look so cool?

We need to help our kids to distinguish fact from fiction. And it's not too soon to begin. National studies show that the average age when a child first tries alcohol is 11; for marijuana, it's 12. And many kids start becoming curious about these substances even sooner. So let's get started!

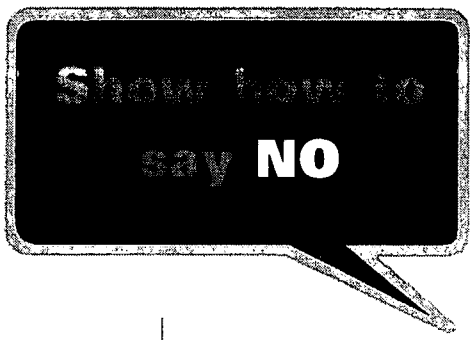
• Listen carefully

Student surveys reveal that when parents listen to their children's feelings and concerns, their kids feel comfortable talking with them and are more likely to stay drug-free.

• Role play how to say "no"

Role play ways in which your child can refuse to go along

with his friends without becoming a social outcast. Try something like this, "Let's play a game. Suppose you and your friends are at Andy's house after school and they find some beer in the refrigerator and ask you to join them in drinking it. The rule in our family is that children are not allowed to drink alcohol. So what could you say?"



If your child comes up with a good response, praise him. If he doesn't, offer a few suggestions like, "No, thanks. Let's play with Sony PlayStation instead," or "No thanks. I don't drink beer. I need to keep in shape for basketball."

• Encourage choice

Allow your child plenty of opportunity to become a confident decision-maker. An 8-year-old is capable of deciding if she wants to invite lots of friends to her birthday party or just a close pal or two. A 12-year-old can choose whether she wants to go out for chorus or join the school band. As your child becomes more skilled at making all kinds of good choices, both you and she will feel more secure in her ability to make the right decision concerning alcohol and drugs if and when the time arrives.

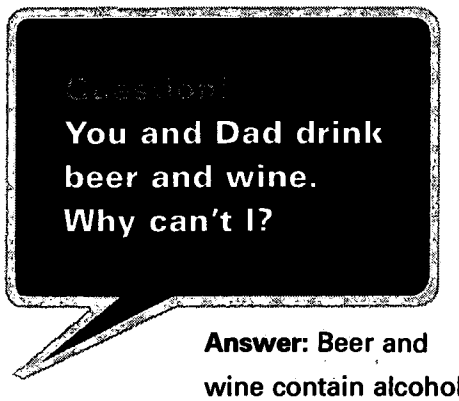
• Provide age-appropriate information

Make sure the information that you offer fits the child's age and stage. When your 6 or 7-year-old is brushing his teeth, you can say, "There are lots of things we do to keep our bodies healthy, like brushing our teeth. But there are also things we shouldn't do because they hurt our bodies, like smoking or taking medicines when we are not sick."

If you are watching TV with your 8 year-old and marijuana is mentioned on a program, you can say, "Do you know

what marijuana is? It's a bad drug that can hurt your body." If your child has more questions, answer them. If not, let it go. Short, simple comments said and repeated often enough will get the message across.

You can offer your older child the same message, but add more drug-specific information. For example, you might explain to your 12-year-old what marijuana and crack look like, their street names and how they can affect his body.



Answer: Beer and wine contain alcohol. When you're young and your body is still growing, alcohol can keep you from growing strong and healthy so you are not allowed to drink anything with alcohol in it until you are an adult.

• Establish a clear family position on drugs

It's okay to say, "We don't allow any drug use and children in this family are not allowed to drink alcohol. The only time that you can take any drugs is when the doctor or Mom or Dad gives you medicine when you're sick. We made this rule because we love you very much and we know that drugs can hurt your body and make you very sick; some may even kill you. Do you have any questions?"

• Be a good example

Children will do what you do much more readily than what you say. So try not to reach for a beer the minute you come home after a tough day; it sends the message that drinking is the best way to unwind. Offer dinner guests non-alcoholic drinks in addition to wine and spirits. And take care not to pop pills, even over-the-counter remedies, indiscriminately. Your behavior needs to reflect your beliefs.

• Discuss what makes a good friend

Since peer pressure is so important when it comes to kids' involvement with drugs and alcohol, it makes good sense to talk with your children about what makes a good friend. To an 8-year-old you might say, "A good friend is someone

who enjoys the same games and activities that you do and who is fun to be around." 11 to 12-year-olds can understand that a friend is someone who shares their values and experiences, respects their decisions and listens to their feelings. Once you've gotten these concepts across, your children will understand that "friends" who pressure them to drink or smoke pot aren't friends at all. Additionally, encouraging skills like sharing and cooperation—and strong involvement in fun, healthful activities (such as team sports or scouting)—will help your children make and maintain good friendships as they mature and increase the chance that they'll remain drug-free.

• Build self-esteem

Kids who feel good about themselves are much less likely than other kids to turn to illegal substances to get high. As parents, we can do many things to enhance our children's self-image. Here are some pointers:

- ☐ *Offer lots of praise for any job well done.*
- ☐ *If you need to criticize your child, talk about the action, not the person.* If your son gets a math problem wrong, it's better to say, "I think you added wrong. Let's try again."
- ☐ *Assign do-able chores.* A 6-year-old can bring her plate over to the sink after dinner; a 12-year-old can feed and walk the dog after school. Performing such duties and being praised for them helps your child feel good about himself.
- ☐ *Spend one-on-one time with your youngster.* Setting aside at least 15 uninterrupted minutes per child per day to talk, play a game, or take a walk together, lets her know you care.

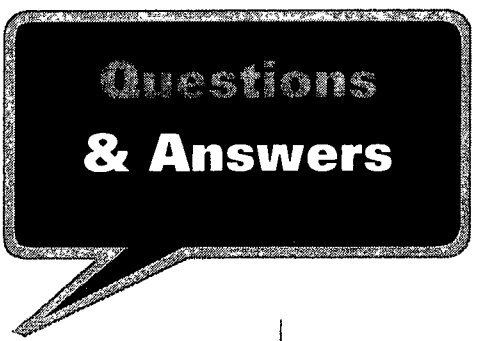
- *Say, "I love you."* Nothing will make your child feel better.

• Repeat the message

Information and lessons about drugs are important enough to repeat frequently. So be sure to answer your children's questions as often as they ask them to initiate conversation whenever the opportunity arises.

• If you suspect a problem, seek help

While kids under age 12 rarely develop a substance problem, it can—and does—happen. If your child becomes withdrawn, loses weight, starts doing poorly in school, turns extremely moody, has glassy eyes—or if the drugs in your medicine cabinet seem to be disappearing too quickly—talk with your child and reach out to any one of the organizations listed here. You'll be helping your youngster to a healthier, happier future.



Why do people take bad or illegal drugs?

There are lots of reasons. Maybe they don't know how dangerous they are. Or maybe they feel bad about themselves or don't know how to handle their problems. Or maybe they don't have parents they can talk to. Why do you think they do it?

Why are some drugs good and some drugs bad for you?

When you get sick, the drugs the doctor gives you will help you get better. But if you take these drugs when you're healthy, they can make you sick. Also, there are some drugs, like marijuana or crack, that are never good for you. To be safe, never ever take any drugs unless Mom, Dad or the doctor says it's okay.

You've finished and are ready to start talking with your kids about tough issues. We hope you found this information helpful. And if you feel you still want more information, contact any of these organizations or go to the library or bookstore and check out these books for parents. Don't forget there are lots of people *you* can talk with like doctors, teachers, members of the clergy, or other parents. And lastly, keep in mind that you know your child best, so go with your instincts.

Organizations For Information Referral and Readings

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry
3615 Wisconsin Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20016
(202) 966-7300

American Academy of Pediatrics
141 Northwest Point Boulevard
PO Box 927, Department C
Elk Grove Village, IL 60009-0927

American Psychiatric Association
Division of Public Affairs
1400 K Street, NW
Washington, DC 20005

Talking with Kids about AIDS

AIDS Action Council
1875 Connecticut Avenue, Suite 700 NW
Washington, DC 20009
(202) 986-1300

AIDS Action Committee
131 Clarendon Street
Boston, MA 02116
1-800-235-2331

American Foundation of AIDS Research
120 Wall Street, 13th Floor
New York, NY 10005
(212) 806-1600

American Red Cross
AIDS Education Office
8111 Gatehouse Road
Falls Church, VA 22042
(703) 206-7120

Association for the Care of Children's Health
7910 Woodmont Avenue, Suite 300
Bethesda, MD 20814
(609) 224-1742

Los Angeles Family AIDS Network
6430 Sunset Boulevard, Suite 1202
Los Angeles, CA 90028
(213) 669-5616

Mother's Voices
165 West 46th Street, Suite 701
New York, NY 10036
1-888-686-4237

National AIDS Hotline
1-800-342-2437

National AIDS Information Clearinghouse
PO Box 6003
Rockville, MD 20849-6003
1-800-458-5231

Pediatric AIDS Foundation
2950 31st Street, Suite 125
Santa Monica, CA 90405
(310) 314-1459

Talking with Kids about Sex

Advocates for Youth
1025 Vermont Avenue, NW Suite 200
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 347-5700

American Association of Sex Educators,
Counselors, and Therapists
PO Box 238
Mt. Vernon, Iowa 52314-0238
(319) 895-8407

ETR Associates
PO Box 1830
Santa Cruz, CA 95061
1-800-321-4407

Planned Parenthood Federation of America
810 Seventh Avenue
New York, NY 10019
(212) 541-7800

Sexuality Information and Education Council
of the U.S. (SIECUS)
130 West 42nd Street, Suite 350
New York, NY 10036
(212) 819-9770

Talking with Kids about Violence

Center to Prevent Handgun Violence
1225 Eye Street, NW Suite 1100
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 289-7319

Educators for Social Responsibility
23 Garden Street
Cambridge, MA 02138
(617) 492-1764

Institute for Mental Health Initiatives
Channeling Children's Anger
4545 42nd Street, NW Suite 311
Washington, DC 20016
(202) 364-7111

The Parenting for Peace and Justice Network
4144 Lindell Boulevard, Suite 124
St. Louis, MO 63108

Talking with Kids about Drugs

The American Council for Drug Education
136 East 64th Street
New York, NY 10021
1-800-488-DRUG

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol
and Drug Information
PO Box 2345
Rockville, MD 20847-2345
1-800-729-6686

National Council on Alcoholism
and Drug Dependence Inc.
1-800-NCA-CALL

National Institute on Drug Abuse Information
& Treatment Referral Helpline
1-800-662-HELP

Partnership for a Drug-Free America
405 Lexington Avenue 16th Floor
New York, NY 10174
(212) 922-1560

PRIDE
3610 Decalb Technology Parkway, Suite 105
Atlanta, GA 30340
(404) 577-4500

Youth Power
2000 Franklin Street, Suite 400
Oakland, CA 94612
1-800-258-2766

READINGS FOR PARENTS

Beekman, Susan and Jeanne Holmes.
Battles, Hassles, Tantrums & Tears: Strategies for Coping with Conflict and Making Peace at Home.
New York: Hearst Books, 1993.

Eyre, Linda and Richard.
How to Talk to Your Child About Sex.
New York: GoldenBooks, 1998.

Faber, Adele and Elaine Mazlish.
How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & How to Listen So Kids Will Talk
Mamaroneck, N Y: International Center for Creative Thinking, 1990.

Hawkins, J. David, et. al.
Preparing for the Drug-Free Years: A Family Activity Book.
Seattle: Developmental Research and Programs, 1998.

Shilts, Randy.
And the Band Played On: Politics, People And the AIDS Epidemic
New York: Viking Penguin, 1987.

Stark, Patty.
Sex Is More Than a Plumbing Lesson: A Parent's Guide to Sexuality Education for Infants Through the Teen Years.
Dallas, TX: Preston Hollow Enterprises, 1990.

READINGS FOR CHILDREN

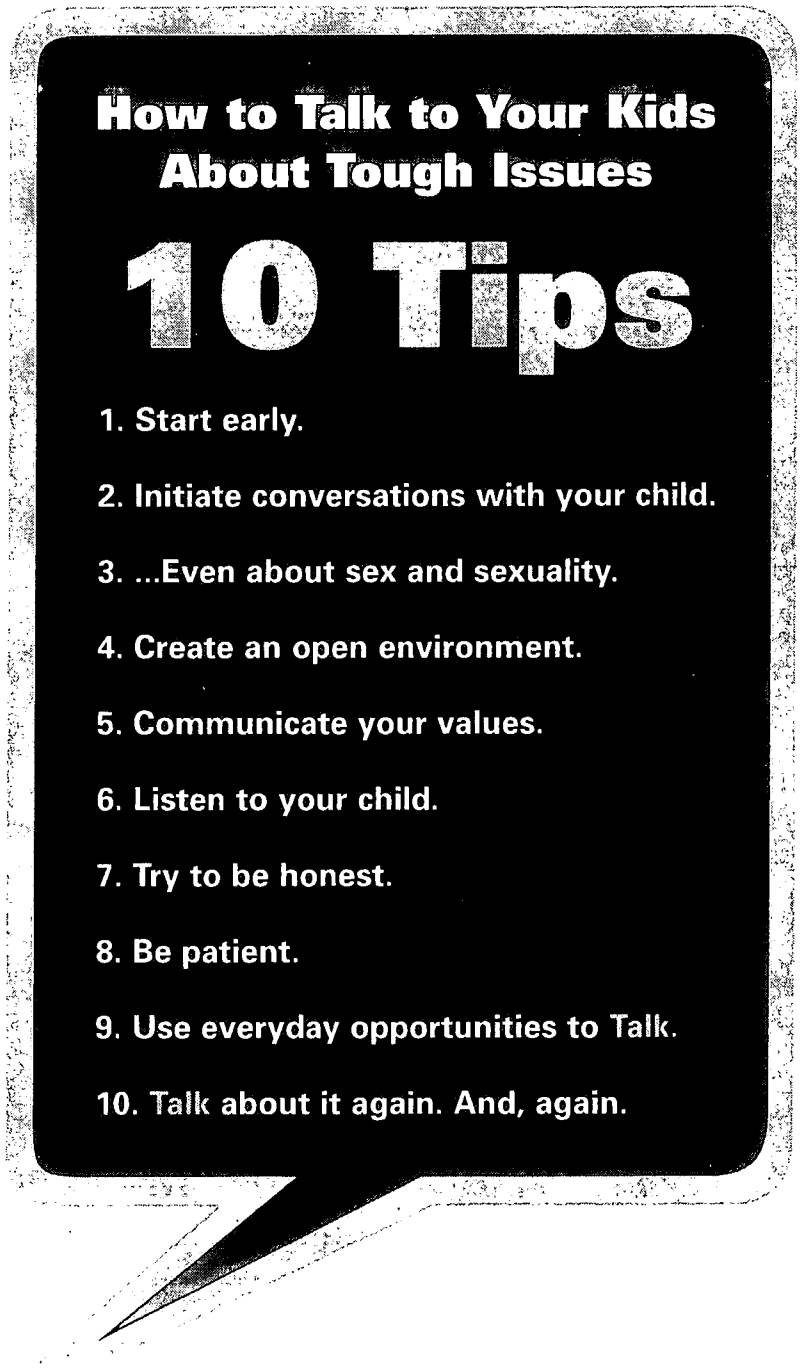
Byars, Betsy.
The Eighteenth Emergency.
New York: Viking, 1973. (Ages 9-12)

Fassler, David, and Kelly McQueen
What's a Virus Anyway? The Kids' Book About AIDS
Burlington, VT: Waterfront Books; 1990. (Ages 5-10)

Girard, Lina Walvoord.
Alex, the Kid with AIDS.
Morton Groves, IL: Albert Whiteman & Co., 1991.
(Ages 8-11)

Harris, Robie H.
It's Perfectly Normal: Growing Up, Changing Bodies, Sex and Sexual Health.
Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 1994.
(Ages 10 and up)

Author: Lynne S. Dumas Design: Dennis Johnson and Jean Sanchirko Photography: Janey Delaney; pages 4, 12, 30; Steve Fisch; pages 8, 18, 21, 24, 37; Terrell Lloyd; pages 2 and 11


How to Talk to Your Kids About Tough Issues
10 Tips
1. Start early.
2. Initiate conversations with your child.
3. ...Even about sex and sexuality.
4. Create an open environment.
5. Communicate your values.
6. Listen to your child.
7. Try to be honest.
8. Be patient.
9. Use everyday opportunities to Talk.
10. Talk about it again. And, again.

CHILDREN NOW
1212 Broadway, Fifth Floor
Oakland, CA 94612
Tel: (510) 763-2444
Fax: (510) 763-1974
www.childrennow.org

KAISER FAMILY FOUNDATION
2400 Sand Hill Road
Menlo Park, CA 94025
Tel: (650) 854-9400
Fax: (650) 854-4800
www.kff.org

VISIT THE WEB SITE:
www.talkingwithkids.org

FOR A FREE BOOKLET CALL:
1-800-CHILD44

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