



Facilitating Tough Conversations with Kids

Use the acronym “ACT” as a foundational practice with all conversations:

- Acknowledge any concerns they may have about their own emotions or a friend’s.
- Care Show them how much you care by listening and taking their concern seriously.
- Tell: Make yourself available as a safe person they can talk to about big problems.

Make space to have conversations:

- At home, consider quiet or more open times in the daily routine where kids are more likely willing to talk, such as in the car, around meals, or before bedtime.
- At school, include daily classroom circles or other venues for proactive, open dialogue.
- Allow the time and place to talk individually or with a group with minimal interruption or time constraint.

Consider what language and topics are age-appropriate for the conversation.

Encourage children to share their stories, experiences, and feelings.

Use open-ended questions and *LISTEN*:

- If they are not yet ready to share, don’t force it. Let them know you are ready when they are.
- Wait until they are done sharing to give a response to ensure that they feel heard and that their voices are respected and honored.

Tough conversations should be a regular practice with kids, not just a response to current events:

- Regular and routine (“proactive”) discussions about serious or important topics establish normalcy and routine in communicating thoughts and feelings, build connections, and promote self-reflection. These discussions pave the way for more effective responsive conversations because kids will have practice with sharing feelings and thoughts, as well as familiarity with conversation protocols and expectations.
- When it comes to responding to a current event or issue, kids are going to want to know more about the situation and why it occurred. It can be overwhelming to face these questions because adults tend to want to have “the right answers” for them. However, kids don’t need all the facts or implications of what happened—they just need to feel heard and to feel safe.



Conversations About Community

The following sections contain tips and strategies for facilitating proactive and responsive discussions

Proactive: Community Roles & Responsibilities

Find out what youth know and encourage them to share their stories, experiences, and feelings about community issues.

- Examples: littering, housing security, volunteering, crime, etc.

Explain ideas or concepts in developmentally appropriate ways.

Use guiding questions to prompt kids to think about issues from a “collectivist” perspective. Highlight how the behavior of one/some has an impact beyond the person(s) involved.

- What makes you proud of our community?
- What are some ways that you/we help take care of our community?
- How does the behavior or choices of an individual/group of individuals impact our school, our family, our community, etc.?
- How do current events affect our community?

Responsive: Community Trauma

Find out what youth know about the event and encourage them to share their stories, experiences, and feelings around the situation.

- If they are not yet ready to share, don't force it. Let them know you are ready when they are.

Share facts in age-appropriate language and dispel any misinformation that may come up in their concerns.

- When giving details of the situation, refrain from casting judgment on the character of the perpetrator(s) and shift the focus to the negative impacts of the actions or choices that were made by the perpetrator(s).

Frame answers to tough questions by emphasizing aspects of safety and resilience.

- With younger children, focus on explaining events in simpler terms and highlight the “helpers” and efforts to ensure safety.
- Older children will have more questions and will want more of the facts but refrain from the graphic details or imagery—stick to the objective information and exploration of thoughts and feelings.

Be open and honest with your responses when supporting students to make sense of any dangerous events or worries.

- It's OK to not have answers! If you don't have an answer, state what is true: you are here for them, support them, and will keep them safe.
- Adults often feel like they need to have answers for kids when just the presence of a supportive adult is often the most powerful answer to their concerns.
- Share your feelings about the situation. Being vulnerable allows kids to see that adults are also impacted by what happened and they are not alone. It also models how you can have these feelings and persevere through the challenging time.

Proactive: Safety Concepts & Concerns

Explore issues of safety as they pertain to home and school, including makes kids feel unsafe.

- Think about a time when you felt very safe—what was happening then?
- What things make you feel safe?
- How does it feel in your body when you are safe?
- Who are people that make you feel safe?
- Have you ever felt unsafe at home/school?
- What does it feel like in your body when you don't feel safe?
- What have others done to make you feel unsafe?
- What does bullying mean? What does it look or sound like?
- Have you ever experienced or witnessed bullying before?

Discuss the appropriate procedure for sharing concerns or unsafe feelings at school & home.

- How do we report something at school?
- How do we share that we are feeling unsafe with our family? Other adults?
- What concerns should we share with adults only?
- What concerns are ok to share in front of a group?

Reframe “snitching” or “tattling” as helping or supporting others/the community, and then explore the differences between the concepts.

- What does it look like/sound like to snitch or tattle?
- What does it look like/sound like to report a concern?
- How is reporting a concern taking responsibility for your community?

Responsive: Safety Violations

Prompt them to share they know about safety issue that occurred and encourage them to share their stories, experiences, and feelings around the situation.

If there is a conflict between individuals, you can utilize [IIRP's Restorative Questions](#) to explore feelings on both sides of the situation, and brainstorm next steps:

For those who engaged in the challenging behavior:

- What happened?
- What were you thinking at the time?
- What have you thought about since?
- Who has been affected by what you have done?
- In what way have they been affected?
- What do you think you need to do to make things right?

For those affected by the challenging behavior:

- What did you think when you realized what had happened?
- What impact has the incident had on you and others?
- What has been the hardest thing for you?
- What do you think needs to happen to make things right?

Explore why safety measures and procedures are important

- Review safety measures and practices in place at school and/or home
- Reassure them that you and other adults are here for support and to answer questions
- Guide them through **realistic thinking** to challenge fears or worries that may arise in the conversation. Emphasize the difference between the possibility of an event occurring and the likelihood that will directly affect them.

Proactive: Supporting Students & Peers

Engage kids in conversations and activities around identifying their feelings and recognizing feelings in others to build emotional awareness and vocabulary.

- Temperature checks—thumbs up/down, weather forecast, etc.
- Feelings faces, emojis, role plays
- Mindfulness exercises

Discuss and practice ways to communicate feelings, to ask for help from others, and how to offer support to others.

- What ways can we support a friend who is sad?
- How can you tell if others need help?
- How do you ask someone for help?

Model collaborative problem solving and communication by prompting kids to analyze pros/cons of decisions and brainstorm solutions to challenges faced by the classroom or family.

Reassure them that you are here for support and to answer questions, as well as what are the preferred ways for them to approach you.

Responsive: Supporting Students & Peers

Teach and model the practice of “Calling in”

- Calling in is giving honest and/or corrective feedback to an individual (privately) with empathy, nonjudgmental curiosity, and a desire to help them learn and grow.
- Calling in differs from “calling out” in that it does not involve publicly announcing and correcting someone’s mistakes, which can be shaming and can negatively impact relationships.
 - [Learning for Justice Article](#)
- Calling in can be used for correcting someone’s choice of words when talking about others or themselves, sharing concerns for the behaviors or well-being of others, conflict resolution, and more.

Model and coach effective ways to give and receive feedback.

- I-Statements
 - “I feel ___ when ___”
 - “When you say this ___, it can be taken as ___”
- Monitor behavior for any concerns that may indicate that they may need support beyond your scope or abilities.



Other Strategies to Support During Difficult Times

Maintain routines

- Sticking to typical routines provides consistency and reassurance of safety and security, both at home and school.

Be mindful of news/media interaction

- Limit screentime (television, social media, etc.) to prevent overexposure to the news, which can increase anxiety and fear.
- The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has created a [Family Media Plan tool](#) that can be used to establish agreed upon limits and goals for family media use.
- More guidance and recommendations around screen use can also be found on the AAP's website [here](#).
- Monitor how you talk about the news around kids and how frequently.

Encourage coping through action

- The biggest source of anxiety and fear can be the unknown or the uncontrollable, so it is beneficial to help kids identify ways that they can have some control in situations beyond their control. Activities include identifying coping skills and strategies to use when feeling scared or worried, or brainstorming ideas for ways to create or influence change in the community.

Emphasize personal wellness

- These are hard conversations to have, and they can take a toll both emotionally and physically. Encourage kids to engage in physical activity, eat healthy, get adequate sleep, and engage in preferred activities or hobbies to maintain their emotional well-being. Model the importance of this by engaging in these strategies along with them, when possible.

Using Circles in the Classroom for Responsive Conversations

At school, use classroom circles to engage the whole class in a conversation about current events and their feelings about them. Explain to students that the purpose of the circle is to discuss how they have been affected by a traumatic event and ideas for how to support themselves and others in moving forward.

Here are some example circle prompt questions that you can use to guide the discussion:

- How do you feel about what happened?
 - Optional: Share how you are feeling in 2-3 words.
- What worries do you have because of what occurred?
- What has been the hardest thing for you to understand about what happened?
- What or who has helped you feel better when you have been scared?
- What strengths do you see in others as they have responded to this situation?
- What strengths do you see in yourself to get through this situation?
- What gives you hope during tough times?
- Who can you lean on for support?
- What do you think needs to be done to prevent this from happening again?
- What do you think we can do at school to be safer? At home?

