

HAVING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS WITH TEENS

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Adolescence marks the long and vital journey from dependence to independence and responsibility.



Crucial developmental tasks of adolescence include young people carving out their own identity and separating from parents and carers.

However, parents and carers still have a key role to play in the lives of the children they care for.



Adolescents have lots to learn about how to navigate life and relationships and how to take care of their bodies, hearts and minds.

For this to happen effectively, we need to adapt the way we communicate.

Connection and collaboration are key. However, this can be difficult in the context of an adolescent's drive for independence, autonomy and agency.

Some conversations and topics might feel difficult e.g. sex, sexting, pornography, parties, drugs, alcohol, gambling... but it is important to approach and not avoid these conversations.



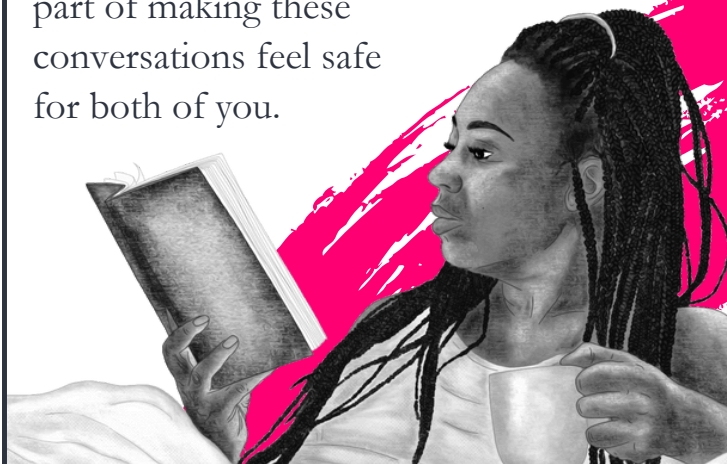
If your parents/carers avoided these subjects when you were an adolescent and/or you or your child have experienced trauma connected to these areas, then these conversations may feel even more difficult and leave you both feeling vulnerable and in a place of distress.



TO SUPPORT THIS, OVER THE NEXT FEW PAGES ARE SOME SUGGESTIONS ON PREPARING FOR AND CARRYING OUT MUTUALLY TOLERABLE, SHAME, BLAME AND JUDGEMENT-FREE CONVERSATIONS.

Before talking to your child, notice any sensations, emotions and thoughts that come up in response to thinking about the subject area. Do they cause you significant distress or shutdown? If this is the case and you are unable to access therapeutic support, can you ask a trusted and safe adult to have this conversation with your child?

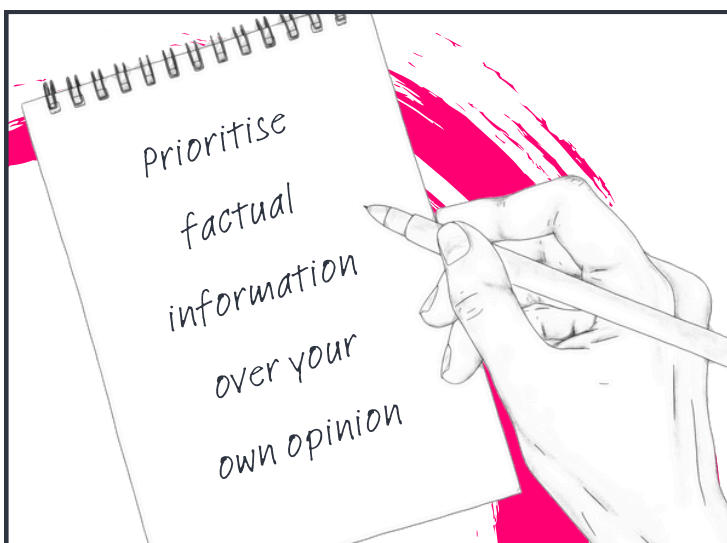
Take care of yourself; being able to regulate your own nervous system is an important part of making these conversations feel safe for both of you.



Educate yourself on relevant issues so you can feel confident when talking to your child. It will also help to keep the conversation grounded in facts.



Prioritise
factual
information
over your
own opinion

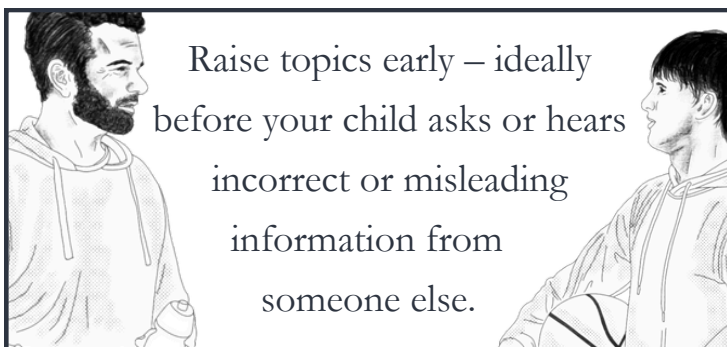


Give them choices and therefore agency:

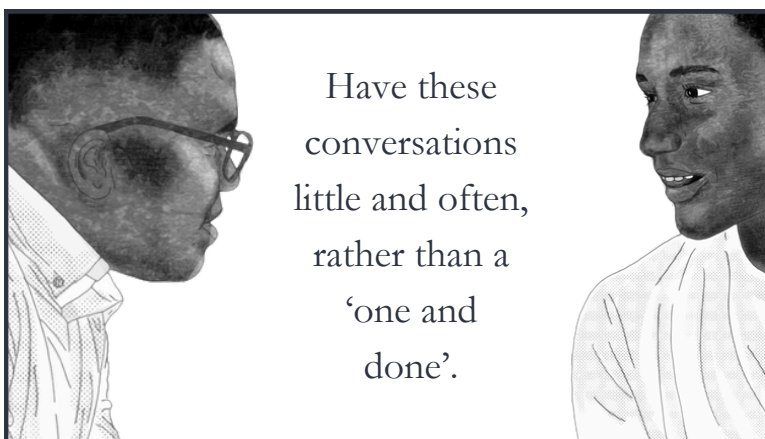
"I'd like to talk about X. When would be a good time for you?"

By opening up these conversations, you are letting them know that these are topics that can be discussed – and that they can be returned to later on.

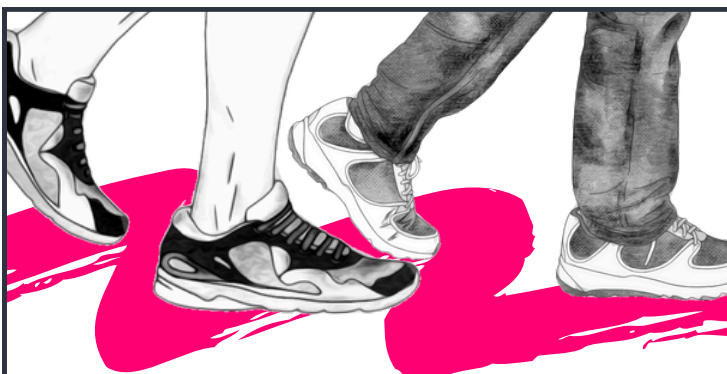
Raise topics early – ideally before your child asks or hears incorrect or misleading information from someone else.



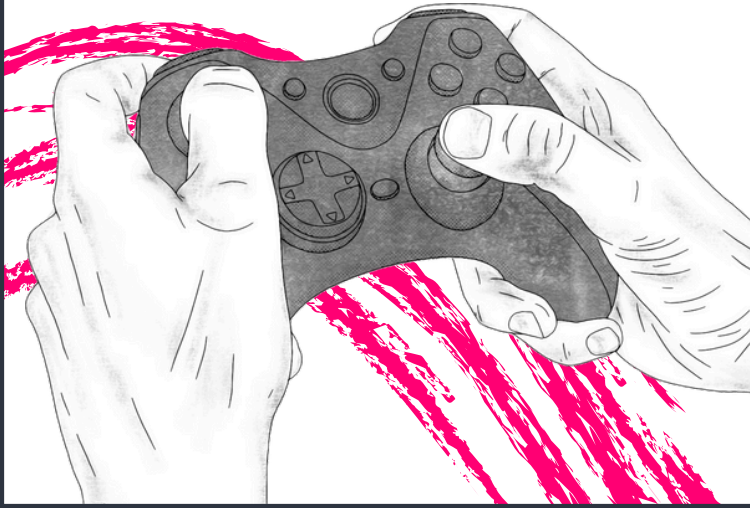
Have these conversations little and often, rather than a 'one and done'.



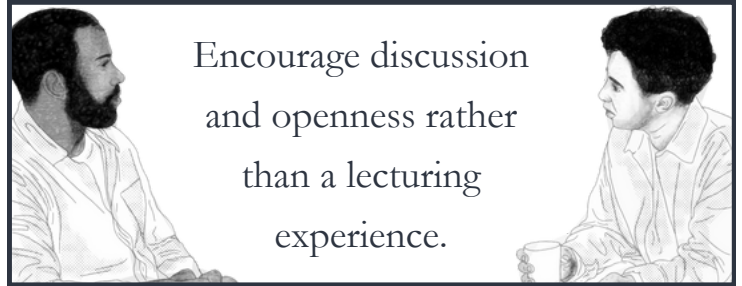
Reduce the need for eye contact; talk whilst driving or walking. This is particularly helpful if you are doing something that your child finds regulating.



Talk whilst doing something together to take the pressure off. For example, gaming, baking or playing a ball game.



Encourage discussion and openness rather than a lecturing experience.



Work on adopting a neutral expression - young people often assume others are angry when they are not.

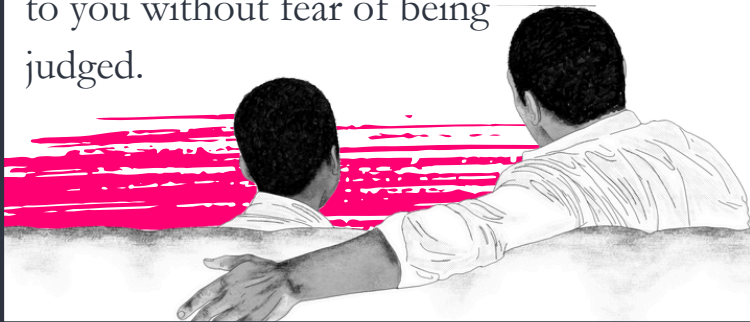
Be curious about their point of view and what they already understand on a topic. Be open to learning from them.



Practice active listening: this includes being fully engaged, demonstrating curiosity and working towards understanding their views rather than planning your own response.



Avoid criticism or judgement (both of your child and others). This will help your child feel that they can bring difficult stuff to you without fear of being judged.



Use clear language. Avoid using metaphors.



Find a balance

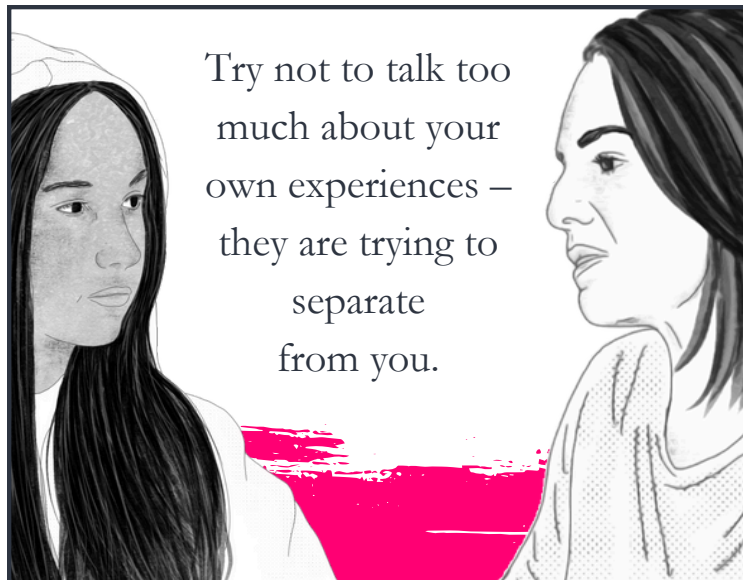


Seek an authoritative position (*nurturing and responsive with clear boundaries*) rather than authoritarian or permissive. This builds trust and reliability and enhances feelings of safety.

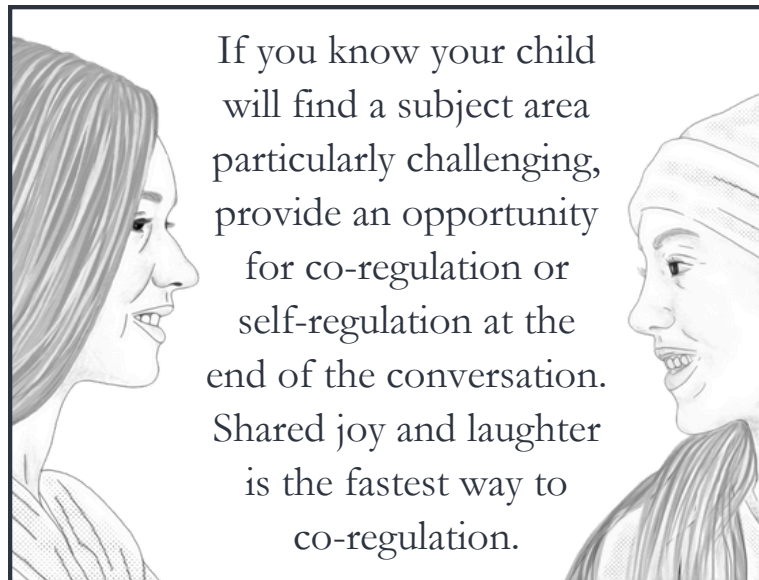
Recruit others as sources of support. Relatives, friends or professionals; safe adults and positive role models with whom they have a trusting relationship. This is especially helpful if there are certain topics you find it particularly challenging. Ensuring your child has had the conversation with a safe adult is the goal.



Try not to talk too much about your own experiences – they are trying to separate from you.

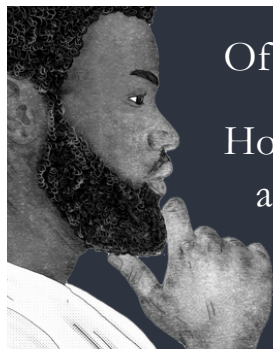


If you know your child will find a subject area particularly challenging, provide an opportunity for co-regulation or self-regulation at the end of the conversation. Shared joy and laughter is the fastest way to co-regulation.



Of course, we can't get it 'right' all of the time - it's IMPOSSIBLE!

However getting things wrong provides the opportunity to take some space and reflect before moving back in and repairing with your child. By re-negotiating how you discuss a particular topic, you will be modelling helpful and flexible ways of having conversations about difficult things.



NEW WEBINAR

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Join clinical psychologist Dr Felicity Williams in exploring the hugely important, but often avoided, topic of online pornography and its impact on young people. Learn ways of facilitating blame and shame-free conversations, as well as offering practical strategies to provide a safer online environment for young people.



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