

The hard-to-have conversations

Talking with your child about tricky personal subjects.

Perhaps your child has been bullied online, sent or received an intimate image, or come across pornography online. Conversations about experiences like these can be difficult.

When you talk to your child about personal subjects, you are trying to balance a number of different things:

- respecting your child's privacy while still making sure they are safe and happy
- giving them space to test their own problem-solving skills online but supporting them as they make their own way
- educating them about people's different personalities but knowing you can't make their choices for them
- establishing boundaries while being understanding and open



On this page:

- [how to start the chat](#)
- [talking about sex and pornography](#)

On other pages for parents and carers, you can get specific help on the subjects you may be trying to discuss with your child, including:

- [cyberbullying](#)
- [online pornography](#)
- [sending nudes and sexting](#)
- [unwanted contact and grooming](#)

How to start the chat

General tips about how to start the chat, whatever the subject.

Plan

Work out what you want to say and how you want to say it, depending on the issue you want to talk about. Go somewhere together where you can talk privately, like in a car driving somewhere. Being in an environment where you can talk without being interrupted can also make things more comfortable for both parent and child.

Perhaps have the talk while you're doing something together, like a long walk or a car trip — especially if you think it will be hard to keep your child engaged in the conversation.

Think of some positive examples of good behaviour that you can use to contrast negative or harmful behaviours.

Listen, don't judge

Let your child know you are there to help them, no matter what. Listening will also help you understand their attitudes and respond to specific issues. For example:

- 'I understand what you're saying, and I'm glad you came to me about this. You're not going to get into trouble, but we need to trust each other, fix this and move forward.'
- 'You might not want to tell me all the detail, but if we can talk honestly about what's happened I promise I will listen and stay calm. No matter what happens, we can do this and I love you.'

Ask questions

Asking questions about how they feel and what they know helps you to gauge your child's level of knowledge and keeps you from lecturing.

For example, you could ask:

- 'Have you seen anyone being bullied online? How did you think that made them feel? How did you feel? Has anything like this ever happened to you?'
- 'Is cyberbullying a problem at your school?'
- Do kids at your school talk about watching online pornography?
- 'Do you think it was right for him to post that video online of his friend having sex with a girl? What do you think might happen to him now that he's done that?'
- 'What do your friends think about sending nudes? Do you agree with them?'
- 'Have you ever been sent a nude? How did you feel? What did you do?'
- 'Has anyone asked you to send a nude? How did that make you feel?'
- 'Have you ever felt uncomfortable about someone contacting you online?'

Get help if you need it

- You could seek advice from a counsellor or [Parentline](#).
- Your child's teacher may also be able to point you towards suitable resources to help you explain things.
- If your child says that they have been abused or assaulted, help is available from a professional counselling service, like [Kids Helpline](#). [The Australian Institute of Family Studies](#) also has some advice on this.
- If the subject is just too difficult for you to talk about with a child in your care, see I need help to start the chat below.

Talking about sex and pornography

We have worked with leading parenting expert Dr Justin Coulson to provide practical support and resources to parents on this sensitive issue.

How to start

The hardest part is how to begin. Here are some possible ways to start the chat:

- 'I don't really know what to say, but we have to have a talk about sex and pornography.'
- 'I read an article today that said kids are seeing pornography at really young ages. Can I talk to you about it?'
- 'I want to talk with you about one of those awkward topics. Is that OK?' (They rarely say 'no', but if they do, respect that, and then set up a time where you can talk.)

Keeping it going

After they have agreed to talk with you, here are some ways to keep things moving.

These tips can be useful whatever the age of your child. But you should tailor the discussion based on your knowledge of your child and their level of maturity and development.

- 'Have you heard the word pornography? What do you know about it?'
- 'Do any of the kids at school ever talk about it?' (Sometimes questions about your child's behaviour may be too confronting, so asking about their peers feels safer.) 'What do they say?'
- 'Have you ever seen it?' If they have seen it, ask: 'Did someone show it to you? Or did you find it yourself?' Try to find out what you can about how they found it and why they were searching for it.
- If you know your child has been exposed to (or is viewing) pornography, it is better to say, 'When I found you looking at pornography the other night...' rather than, 'Have you seen pornography?'
- If they have seen it, reassure them they are not in trouble. Ask: 'When you saw it, how did it make you feel?' Discuss those feelings.
- Depending on your child's questions and maturity, you may wish to discuss issues related to 'consent', 'intimacy in close relationships', and 'respect'. See [What can I do if my child has found pornography online?](#) for detailed advice about what to cover in your discussion.
- Check if your child has any other questions or if you have explained things enough for them.
- Let your child know that any question is OK to ask — nothing is off limits. This is true even when you might have to send them to someone else to find the answers.
- If you don't know the answer to one of their questions, tell them you will find out. Then use it as an opportunity to have another talk.

Primary School kids – age 5-12

For kids under 8 years old

- Strike a balance between protecting your children and avoiding increasing their curiosity. If you are reasonably sure your child has not been exposed to pornographic content, you might feel that raising the subject will simply make them curious.
- At this age, it may be best to couch a discussion about pornography in a broader discussion about sex, protecting our bodies, abuse, or other similarly delicate topics. Your approach will depend on your own family values and the maturity level of your child.
- Focus more on how your child is feeling than on what exactly they saw. Children at this age may feel 'yucky' and scared — even violated — but they may also feel curious.

- While you may want to avoid the issue of ‘too much information’, try to respond to your child’s curiosity with honesty and candour.

For pre-teens 8-12

- At this age, kids may be curious about sex and sexuality. As they enter puberty and adolescence, changes in the brain and body combined with other hormonal changes can increase your child’s interest in this area.
- They may hear things in the playground or at a friend’s home. They might want to know more, but feel that asking mum or dad about sex would be embarrassing. Sometimes they may seek information out themselves, or someone else may show them images and videos — and these may include pornography.
- You may have already talked with them about things like puberty, body image, sex, gender, keeping bodies safe (from abuse) or even pornography. If not, now is a good time to start planning these conversations.

I need help to start the chat

If you feel it is just too hard for you to have a conversation about sex or pornography with a child in your care, here are a few things you could try:

- Get a book — there are lots of suitable books on this topic for children of different ages.
- Purchase an educational, and age-appropriate, DVD for your child to watch.
- Find a trusted adult, such as an auntie, uncle or teacher to help with the conversation.
- Talk to the school counsellor, a professional counselling service or [Kids Helpline](#) or [Parentline](#).
- Try to let your child know why you find it difficult to talk about these topics – they are tricky and sensitive. Explain that you want them to have access to the right information.



Australian Government



eSafety
Commissioner

Information from The Office of the eSafety Commissioner (Dec 2020):

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/parents/skills-advice/hard-to-have-conversations#how-to-start-the-chat>