



RESILIENCE-BASED CONVERSATIONS

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The conversation is the backbone of the relationship you have with your children. If your conversations are strong, so are your relationships, and so are your children. Strong conversations equal resilient children. Here are nine tips for having resilience-based conversations.

1. Accept all emotions.

We like to say that a person's emotions are facts in the same way that having a headache is a fact. If your children tell you that they are angry—at you, at a sibling, or at the world—they are angry.

Even if you think they shouldn't be, the fact is—they are angry.

Acknowledge that they are angry. Then you can help them decide what to do about their anger.

Oftentimes, when our children feel sad or angry, or some other negative emotion, we feel like we have failed as parents. We feel as though we are responsible for fixing those emotions.

Sometimes, we even get angry in response to our children's negative emotions. We say things like, "You shouldn't be so angry," or we try to convince them to feel another way by saying something like, "Look on the bright side."

But it doesn't work.

In fact, there's research that says when you tell someone to cheer up, it can actually make them feel worse (not that we needed research to tell us that).

Think back to the last time someone tried to talk you out of a strong emotion. You probably felt a little, or a lot, irritated with that person. Your negative feeling didn't go away simply because your friend told you to perk up. In fact, it probably got worse.

When you make your child feel bad for feeling bad, you give them a double whammy of negativity. In addition to the original negative emotion, now they also feel like they are letting you down.

They feel guilty for not being cheerful. They might even feel deficient because they cannot figure out how to cheer up. Children, of course, can't put words to this, but when you tell them that they shouldn't feel bad, it only makes them feel worse.

So how can you accept their emotions?

Say something like, "I can see you're really angry. Do you want to talk about it?"

Or, "I understand you're angry. What do you need from me?"

Or, "Okay, I'm glad you told me. How can I help?"

And avoid saying things such as:

"Stop being so angry."

Or, "You're being ungrateful."

Or, "Don't be angry at me. Be angry at your dad."

Instead, acknowledge whatever the emotion is. Name it, and then ask what they need.

2. Level with your kids.

One of the responsibilities of parenthood is to give children the information they need so that they can make good decisions in their lives.

Parents are their children's most important sources of information. Your children need accurate information so that they can make wise decisions.

If you give them inaccurate information, if you sugar coat or dance around issues, or if you lie to them, one of two

things will happen. They will either believe you, and they will fail to live life with the necessary facts of reality. Or, they will learn that you are not a trustworthy source of information.

If you give them accurate information, on the other hand, they will come to you with questions, and they will trust that you are a reliable source of information. If you level with them, they will know that they can count on you to give them details, even when it is hard and uncomfortable for you to do so.

Leveling with children means that you give them accurate, age-appropriate information. It **does not** mean that you have to give them information you would rather keep private, but it does mean that you are honest when asked a question you would rather not answer.

This is a perfectly reasonable response to a child's question:

"I can certainly understand why you would ask that question, and I am glad you feel comfortable asking me things like this. The truth is, the answer is private and a bit embarrassing, so I am not going to answer it today. Maybe in a few years I will feel more comfortable talking about this issue."

Leveling with children also **does not** mean that you have to answer questions immediately. You can always buy time with:

"You deserve an honest answer to that question, but the truth is, I'm not ready to answer you. I don't know what to say. I need a day or two, so let's talk tomorrow. If I don't bring it up, feel free to ask me again."



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3. Listen to understand and not to win.

The difference between active listening and listening with an agenda is this: Active listening is listening with the intent to gather information; whereas listening with an agenda is listening with the intent of giving information.

When you are being an active listener, you are listening to understand. When you are listening with an agenda, you are trying to win.

When you are being an active listener, you are asking questions. The conversation continues, and your children feel understood. You are drawing out more information. You are showing your children that understanding them is more important to you than pushing your agenda on them.

4. Stay calm. Be curious. Then revisit.

At some point or another, your children will say something that you find distressing or even downright horrifying. When this happens, here is a great mantra to remember:

Stay calm. Be curious. Then, revisit.

Stay calm because sometimes the adult's reaction is much, much worse than the problem, and it gives the child too much attention for something that might not need attention.

Beyond that, sometimes communicating that you are horrified, either through gasps or words, communicates that the situation should be horrifying, when, in fact, it isn't.

Here is an example: Let's say your child says, "I am ugly, and I'm fat."

If you are horrified by this, your child might think that being "fat" or "ugly" or whatever it might be, is something to be terribly upset by.

And you can see why this can cause a cascade of problems down the road. Don't forget that you are modeling the behavior you want your children to follow. Showing horror in response to comments about weight or physical appearance might send the wrong message to your children about how they should act when it comes to other people's weight or looks.

Be curious so you can determine whether their words reflect an actual problem. Sometimes, we assign unnecessary meaning to a child's words without determining what the child actually means.

"I want to kill myself," might reflect a serious problem, but it might also be a figure of speech. You need to figure out which one it is so you can give it the appropriate attention.

If the child has an actual problem that needs to be addressed, either through a deeper conversation or intervention, calm curiosity provides the safe environment necessary to encourage the child to disclose more information.

Big responses can scare a child. The child might think they have said something wrong and might shut down, change the subject, or cover up their true feelings to appease you.

If you are unsure what to think, revisit the conversation another time so that you can extract more information. Does the child still feel the same way? Was the child simply "in a funk?" Does the situation require further intervention?

When you start having conversations that place curiosity before judgment, you learn how to read your kids and extract information. When you are faced with a bigger problem, you have experience staying calm so that you can figure out what needs to be done.

5. Nurture their Inner Wisdom.

Let's start by answering the obvious question: What is Inner Wisdom?

Some people call it intuition. Some people call it gut feeling or instinct. We call it Inner Wisdom. It is the ability to sense and feel in our bodies what is true and good for us. It is the wisdom that exists beyond conscious thought, and it is, in fact, more reliable than conscious thought.

Inner Wisdom is at work when you can feel in your body that something is wrong, even though you have no logical reason for thinking that. It is also at work when something just feels right, but you aren't sure why.

Inner Wisdom acts as your internal compass. It warns you when something is amiss, and it points you in the direction of what is good for you and of your true desires.

Sadly, the older we get, the more likely it is that we lose touch with our Inner Wisdom. In fact, kids are expected to spend much of their time abdicating their Inner Wisdom in favor of what other people are telling them to do. They are taught to obey their parents, teachers, coaches, admissions' counselors, babysitters, and friends' parents—even above their own Inner Wisdom.

Though this is appropriate at times, the danger is that children lose touch with their Inner Wisdom. That inside voice, that intuition, that instinct is stifled by all those outside voices telling them what to do, telling them to serve others, and telling them to stop thinking about their own needs.

The results can be devastating because children are trying to figure out who they are and what unique contributions they have to offer the world. They need their Inner Wisdom as guidance.

When they can trust their Inner Wisdom, guess what happens? They take their cues not from their peers, but



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from their own internal compasses. They follow their own dreams, build self-confidence, and ultimately understand that they are worthy, capable, and valuable ... as they are.

Many of our parenting programs are focused around helping children stay in touch with their Inner Wisdom. A great way to start is by having conversations that remind them that their bodies have answers for them. These conversations could start like this:

"You seem to be having a hard time making this decision. What is your gut telling you?"

"Do you have any friends who feel safe? What about friends who feel like they do not have your best interests in mind?"

"Have you ever had a feeling that you shouldn't do something, but you did it anyway? How did that turn out?"

6. Look for openings.

If you know that you want to have a conversation with your child, but the topic isn't time-sensitive, wait until you can find a natural opening.

Calling your child into the room, sitting your child down on the couch, and talking to them about self-awareness will cause them to feel suspicious. They will wonder what they said or did to bring about this conversation.

With their mind focused on where the conversation is headed and whether they are in trouble, they won't be as open to listening to your words.

Instead, wait for openings, even seemingly random ones. One of our favorite examples is a personal one.

Jocelyn's family talked about pejoratives, body parts, racism, and beauty standards because of the song *Baby Got Back*.

The point is: Openings are everywhere when you train your brain to find them.

7. Have 100 one-minute conversations

Kids need things repeated. They need you to tell them 164 times (a month) to brush their teeth before bed.

Beyond that, your children's brains can only process so much new information before they become confused, bored, or distracted. Therefore, we are big fans of having a ton of mini-conversations rather than one long conversation.

This allows you to repeat important information, build on information, and begin to show children the complexities and layers of certain topics.

Here's an example: If your five-year-old asks where babies come from, should you cover vaginal sex, IVF, c-sections, adoption, vaginal birth, and surrogacy in one conversation?

Probably not. Instead, you might want to lead with, "The most common way that babies are made is through something called vaginal intercourse."

Then, follow up later with other conversations about the many different ways that people come into this world.

Don't worry if their knowledge is incomplete: You have ample time to add knowledge. Beyond that, when you have lots of mini-conversations, you have the opportunity to correct things they misunderstood or that you regret saying.

As they grow into adults, of course, your conversations will likely become longer and more philosophical. Still, having lots of mini conversations will help you keep communication open on all of the topics you want to discuss with your kids of any age.

8. Be shoulder-to-shoulder.

Shoulder-to-shoulder activities are exactly what they sound like: activities in which you are shoulder-to-shoulder with your children rather than face-to-face.

It is often easier for children to open up during shoulder-to-shoulder conversations because they feel less vulnerable and less intense than face-to-face conversations.

Children come to recognize that face-to-face is for the big stuff: the lectures, confrontations, and discipline.

Shoulder-to-shoulder conversations happen in the car, while baking, while playing a game, or while working on a project together.

Children perceive them as casual, easy, and natural. Having shoulder-to-shoulder conversations is even more important when the topic is awkward. Your kids will feel at least a little better talking to you about sex, erections, or their menstrual cycle if you aren't staring them in the eyes.

9. Return when the dust has settled.

Do you revisit conflict when tempers have cooled?

Or, when your child has a giant emotional meltdown, do you breathe a sigh of relief after it passes and go about your business?

Don't prod a sleeping bear, right?

The truth is, the gold is in the second half. When you and your child revisit a conflict with clear heads, you can find solutions. This is where growth can happen. It is where you and your child can begin to appreciate each other's perspectives, and it is where you can find solutions absent the flood of emotions that were clouding your thoughts in round one.