

ADOPTING A FAMILY APPROACH

Practical Tips

Having honest conversations with children and young people

Creating the right situation and planning

Plan where, when and how to talk to the child so that they will listen:

- Ensure you have put a good amount of time aside, so that the child does not feel rushed.
- Consider the time of day and what the child has just finished doing or is about to do after, for example, in the evening the child may be too tired or not in the mood to concentrate.
- Ensure that there will not be interruptions.
- If possible, have the conversation in a relaxed and neutral place like on a walk or a bike ride or even in the car.
- You should be ready for things to get very emotional and perhaps distressing.
- Consider who else you should tell before the child – so they can be ready to give emotional support.
- Think about the sorts of questions the child is likely to ask you – so you can have the answers ready.
- Young people can sense when we, as adults, feel uncomfortable, therefore modelling openness is key.

Starting the conversation

Children are often aware of more than we realise.

- Being direct, demonstrating openness and respect can be the appropriate approach.
- Getting a balance (so not too forceful or too vague) can avoid a child from clamming up and prevent the conversation from veering to a different topic.
- Explain everything slowly, in words that the child will easily understand.

There are many resources to support starting conversations:

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- YouTube videos.
- Specialist books in the topic area.
- Games or interactive activities can help children open up. For example, playing cards, cooking, 'Blob cards' and 'Story Cubes'.

Listening is important

It should be a two-way conversation.

- For them to feel truly involved it's very important to show the child that you are listening to them and really value what they're telling you.
- Start by asking questions that don't just have "yes" and "no" answers. This is going to give the child the chance to tell you what they really think.
- Then give them as long as they need to answer without interrupting.
- They may be nervous or still working out what they really think and that could take a little time.
- Don't be afraid to let the child ask you questions too.
- It is very important to make sure they know that they are not responsible or to blame in any way for what you are telling them.

If the child has approached you to have a difficult conversation

It has probably taken a lot of courage to even mention it to you, so you need to make them feel as comfortable as possible about continuing the conversation.

- If it's not the right time or place, agree when and where you're going to talk. And when you do get together begin by reassuring the child that they can tell you anything they need to, and you won't blame them in any way.
- Listen carefully to what they have to say and if you don't understand anything, be honest and ask them to explain. Above all, let them say everything they want to say before you give any opinions or advice.
- It's OK to ask the child if there is anything they would like you to do, but you may not be able to do anything at all; for example, if they're grieving over a death. What you can always do is reassure and support.

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- If there is anything you plan to do, let the child know. Otherwise, they may feel like you're going behind their back and cause mistrust.

Ending and following the conversation

Difficult conversations should always have an ending:

- Ask how they are feeling.
- Ask what they are going to do straight after.
- Ensure there is support in place.
- Ensure they know how to access support if they need it.
- Ask if there is anything else, they would like to discuss / ask / do before you part.
- If appropriate, arrange a follow-up conversation.
- If appropriate, agree the next steps and what you are going to action / do following the conversation.

Source: With special thanks to [Greenwich Safeguarding Children Partnership](#) for allowing us to reproduce their guide 'Carrying out Difficult Conversations with Children and Young People'.