

Guidance Corner from Mr. Anderson, Ms. Shah, and Ms. Armstrong

The following are excerpts from the Monique Burr Foundation for Children, a non-profit organization dedicated to child safety education.

Prevention education is extremely important for children and teens today, as they face new and varied dangers more than ever before. Yet for a variety of reasons, many adults think discussing topics such as abuse, sexual abuse, online dangers, sexting, and pornography is inappropriate for children and teens. Some think that children and teens don't know what the concepts mean, and that having these conversations will expose them prematurely to material that might cause them emotional distress. However, research tells us that is not the case. Victimization, including sexual abuse and sexual exploitation, is very real starting at a very young age.

Children need to be educated and empowered with prevention education curricula from caring and trained adults. In addition to students receiving prevention education, parents or guardians need to discuss safety issues with their children. These are not always the easiest conversations to have, but they are important. So, we have provided you here with tips and activities to help make these conversations easier.

* Become familiar and comfortable by researching a topic, such as sexual abuse, digital abuse/safety, cyberbullying, or sexting, before talking with your child/teen. Becoming informed and comfortable about a topic prior to discussing it is the key to having a productive conversation and not distressing your child/teen. Our website and app have downloadable Safety Briefs and free online trainings for parents on these topics and more; we also provide resources for you to find additional help.

* Ensure your conversations are developmentally appropriate for your child's age. If you need help understanding their developmental level, see the Safety Brief: Child Development on our website.

* Allow children/teens the opportunity to talk and to ask questions before you start talking. Often they know more than parents think, or they have incorrect information that you can correct once you begin the conversation.

* Have ongoing conversations rather than one "big talk." If your child/teen is asking about an issue, answer them honestly and provide safety knowledge to educate and satisfy their request, but avoid giving too much information, or information that is too developmentally advanced.

Activities to Facilitate Conversations:

Letters/Journals – Sometimes it is easier to write thoughts than to articulate them verbally. If you are having difficulty beginning a conversation about a topic, ask your child/teen to write you a letter explaining what they already know and any questions they may have. This gives you a starting point for the conversation and questions to address directly. Should it still be difficult for you to have a face-to-face conversation with them, you can reply in turn with a letter.

Topic Cards – Keep a "Conversation Jar" available; you or your child/teen can write down a topic or question you want to discuss on a card and place it in the jar to discuss at an appropriate time.

Books – Books often naturally lead to questions or conversations, so they are great for facilitating discussions about sensitive topics. Depending on the child’s age and the topic, you may choose to read a book with your child, or ask them to read it first and then discuss it.

Websites – In addition to books, there are many great websites available to help facilitate discussions about sensitive topics. Look for websites with credible sources and authors for your child/teen to review, to help educate them, and to help you start conversations.

Media – Look for everyday opportunities to have discussions with your child/teen about tough and sensitive topics. Movies, TV shows, and even commercials can often lead to a conversation about something of concern. Begin by asking them about the movie or show, what they thought, was there anything they saw they did not understand, was there anything they noticed that might not be safe, or anything that concerned them? Use these questions as starting points for a more in-depth conversation.

Summary

As a parent, your main concern is to protect your child/teen. The best way to do that is to stay active and involved in their life to assess any risks they may be facing, and to educate and empower them to protect themselves. Ongoing conversations about tough and sensitive topics are a great way to do that and more.