



Teen Pregnancy & Prevention Partnership

Tips for Responding to Challenging Questions

When a child catches you off guard with an embarrassing question, uses sexualized language, or says something that you find extremely offensive, you need to watch your **primary reaction**. Our goal in this situation is to appear “unshockable,” even if we have been thrown dramatically by what has been said or asked. Here are a few techniques for remaining objective:

- **Poker face.** Be mindful and aware of your body language and expression. How is your face changing? Does the tone of your voice change? If you’re not aware of how your body language and expression changes when your child asks a difficult question, you may shut down communication between yourself and the child.
- **Check your feelings.** Learn to recognize how different feelings look and how they make your body feel, take this time to get in touch with your feelings. Recognizing your feelings allows you to decide whether to answer the question immediately or at a later time and gives you more time to think about how you want to respond.
- **Stall.** Stop and pause for a moment and allow yourself to regain your composure. You can do this by:
 - **Nodding your head slowly.** It lets the person know you’ve heard what they said and are thinking about it. Also, this gives you some time to determine whether you want to answer the question immediately or later, allowing you to respond to the child’s question rather than react to it.
- **Praise the question.** It’s important to praise the child for asking questions. For example, you can say, “You know, I’m really glad you came to me with that,” or “That’s a really good question.”
- **Clarify** by asking a question in return. For example, “When you ask what birth control I use, are you truly interested in my method or do you want to know what’s right for you?”
- **Turn the situation back to the person.** This can be particularly effective when you’re dealing with a child who is looking for advice, or who simply seems bent on getting a rise out of you. For example, if a child were to say, “My girlfriend just told me she’s pregnant. What should I do?” You can ask, “What do you think you should do?” It’s better to help the child figure a situation out for her or himself, rather than make a decision for them. Asking other questions can help lead them to evaluate the situation and take steps toward making a decision.
- **Refer the child to someone else.** In some situations, you may feel too uncomfortable with the question or situation to be able to respond effectively. For example, if you do not have experience with a specific sexual health topic or hold strong values around an aspect of sexuality, it would not be appropriate to give incorrect or biased information. It would be appropriate, however, to try to refer them to someone who has this information and feels comfortable providing it.
- **If you don’t know the answer, say “I don’t know.”** Children appreciate honesty, and they really don’t expect us to be all-knowing. The important thing is that you follow up –



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either suggest you look for the answer together or let the child know that you'll get the information for them.

- **Explore** a concept. For example, "I know that I have to take the pill every day, but sometimes I just can't be bothered." Asking, "What are some of the reasons that taking a pill every day is bothersome?" can help you identify a potential barrier, and then discuss how the barrier can be overcome. In addition, you can ask, "What do you think will happen if you don't take the pill every day?" Letting them talk about consequences will help them own their behavior without you ending up as a punishing figure.

Above all, remain calm. You don't need to know everything, and you don't need to answer every question at the moment it is asked. Being open to listening to a client's questions and concerns, and not reacting in a judgmental manner, is most important.

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For more tips on how to respond to challenging questions children may ask, visit this link:

The Secret to Answering Difficult Questions Children Ask: A Simple Framework for Parents
<https://www.thetalkinstitute.com/blog/the-secret-to-answering-difficult-questions-children-ask-a-simple-framework-for-parents>