



...about violence.

Talking With Kids About Tough Issues

A National Campaign to Support Parents by the Kaiser Family Foundation and Children Now



## Introduction

**R**aising a child is one of the most gratifying jobs you'll ever have—and one of the toughest. Try as you might to be the best parent you can, our complex world challenges you every day with disturbing issues that are difficult for children to understand and for parents to explain. But explain we must, or we miss a critical opportunity. Research shows that children, especially those between the ages of 8 and 12, want their parents to talk with them about today's toughest issues, including violence. Even when they reach adolescence, they want to have a caring adult in their lives to talk about these issues. In fact, those who have early conversations are more likely to continue turning to their parents as they become teens.

Violence in today's world—in the media, in our neighborhoods and even in our schools—can make our children feel frightened, unsafe and insecure. Kids are hearing about and often must cope with tough issues such as violence at increasingly earlier ages, often before they are ready to understand all the aspects of complicated situations. Yet, there is hope. Parents and other caring adults have a unique opportunity to talk with their children about these issues first, before everyone else does.

Even in such complex times, parents have the ability to raise healthy, confident, secure children who know how to resolve conflicts peacefully and make smart decisions to protect themselves. Parents should talk with their children to help them learn correct information and to impart the values they want to instill. Be a consistent, reliable, knowledgeable source of information. Here are some tips on getting started.

- Develop open communication

It is important that you talk with your kids openly and honestly. Use encouragement, support and positive reinforcement so your kids know that they can ask any question—on any topic—freely and without fear of consequence. Provide straightforward answers; otherwise, your child may make up her own explanations that can be more frightening than any honest response you could offer. If you don't know the answer, admit it—then find the correct information and explore it together. Use everyday opportunities to talk as occasions for discussion. Some of the best talks you'll have with your child will take place when you least expect them. And remember that it often takes more than a single talk for children to grasp all they need to know. **So talk, talk and talk again.**

**Question:**

In the movies, guys like Steven Seagal and Arnold Schwarzenegger fight all the time and everybody says they're heroes. How come?

**Answer:** The people you mentioned are actors playing a part; if they acted like that in real life, they'd probably be in jail or dead. I don't think anyone who relies on violence all the time is very smart or brave at all.

- Encourage them to talk it out

Children feel better when they talk about their feelings. It lifts the burden of having to face their fears alone and offers an emotional release. If you sense that a violent event (whether real or fictional) has upset your youngster, you might say something like, "That TV program we saw seemed pretty scary to me. What did you think about it?" and see where the conversation leads. If your child appears constantly depressed, angry or feels persecuted, it is especially important to reassure him that you love him and encourage him to talk about

his concerns. And if he has been violent or a victim of violence, it is critical to give him a safe place to express his feelings.

- Monitor the Media

Over the years, many experts have concluded that viewing a lot of violence in the media can be risky for children. Studies have shown that watching too much violence—whether on TV, in the movies, or in video games—can increase the chance that children will be desensitized to violence, or even act more aggressively themselves. Pay special attention to the kinds of media your children play with or watch. Parental advisories for music, movies, TV, video and computer games can help you choose age-appropriate media for your children. Try watching TV or

playing video games with your children and talk with them about the things you see together. Encourage your children to think about what they are watching, listening to or playing—how would they handle situations differently? Let them know why violent movies or games disturb you. For example, you might tell your nine-year-old, "Violence just isn't funny to me. In real life people who get shot have families and children, and it's sad when something bad happens to them." Watching the news and other media with your child enables you to

discuss current events like war and other conflicts, and can provide an opportunity to reinforce the consequences of violence.

- Parents and other caring adults can help tone down the effects of these violent messages. Here's how:
  - Actively supervise your child's exposure to all forms of media violence.
  - Limit TV viewing to those programs you feel are appropriate.
  - Be selective about which movies your child sees and which video and computer game he plays.
  - Establish rules about the Internet by going on-line together to choose sites that are appropriate and fun for your child.
  - Consider using monitoring tools for TV and the Internet, like the v-chip, a new technology that allows parents to block TV programs they consider inappropriate.
  - Take advantage of the ratings system that provides parents with information about the content of a TV program or movie.
- Acknowledge your children's fears and reassure them of their safety

Children who experience or witness violence, as well as those who have only seen violent acts on TV or in the movies, often become anxious and fearful. That's why it's important to reassure a child that their personal world can remain safe. Try saying something like this to your 7 or 8-year-old: "I know that you are afraid. I will do my very best to make sure you are safe." The recent school tragedies in Colorado and in Georgia have shown that violence can not only frighten children but can make them feel guilty for not preventing it. By providing consistent support and an accepting environment, you can help reduce children's anxieties and fears.

- Take a stand

Parents need to be clear and consistent about the values they want to instill. Don't cave in to your children's assertion that "everybody else does it (or has seen it)" when it comes to allowing them to play what you view as an excessively violent game or to watch an inappropriate movie. You have a right and responsibility to say, "I don't like the message that game sends. I know that you play that game at your friend's house, but I don't want it played in our house."

- Control your own behavior

When it comes to learning how to behave, children often follow their parents' lead, which is why it is important to examine how you approach conflict. Do you use violence to settle arguments? When you're angry, do

## Organizations for Information Referral and Readings

### Talking With Kids About Violence

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry  
3615 Wisconsin Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20016  
(202) 966-7300  
[www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org)

American Academy of Pediatrics  
141 Northwest Point Boulevard  
PO Box 927, Department C  
Elk Grove Village, IL 60009-0927  
[www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)

American Psychological Association  
750 First Street, NE  
Washington, DC 20002  
(202) 336-5500  
[www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)

Center for the Prevention of School Violence  
20 Enterprise Street, Suite 2  
Raleigh, NC 27607-7375  
1-800-299-6054  
[www.ncsu.edu/cpsv](http://www.ncsu.edu/cpsv)

Educators for Social Responsibility  
23 Garden Street  
Cambridge, MA 02138  
(617) 492-1764  
[www.esrnational.org](http://www.esrnational.org)

Institute for Mental Health Initiatives  
Channeling Children's Anger  
4545 42nd Street, NW, Suite 311  
Washington, DC 20016  
(202) 364-7111  
[www.imhi.org](http://www.imhi.org)

Institute for Peace and Justice  
4144 Lindell Boulevard, Suite 124  
St. Louis, MO 63108  
<http://members.aol.com/ppjn/index.html>

National Funding Collaborative on Violence Prevention  
815 15th Street, NW, Suite 801  
Washington, DC 20005  
(202) 393-7731  
[www.usakids.org](http://www.usakids.org)

you yell or use physical force? If you want your child to avoid violence, model the right behavior for her.

- Set limits regarding children's actions towards others  
Let your child know that teasing can become bullying and roughhousing can get out of control. If you see your child strike another, impose a “time out” in order for him to calm down, then ask him to explain why he hit the child. Tell him firmly that hitting is not allowed and help him figure out a peaceful way to settle the problem.

- Hold family meetings  
Regularly scheduled family meetings can provide children—and us—with an acceptable place to talk about complaints and share opinions. Just be sure that everyone gets a chance to speak. Use these meetings to demonstrate effective problem-solving and negotiation skills. Keep the meetings lively, but well controlled, so children learn that conflicts can be settled creatively and without violence.

- Convey strict rules about weapons  
Teach your child that real guns and knives are very dangerous and that they can hurt and kill people. You might say, “I know in the cartoons you watch and the video and computer games you play, the characters are always shooting each other. They never get hurt; they just pop up again later like nothing ever happened. But in real life, someone who gets shot will be seriously hurt; sometimes they even die.”

- Talk about gangs and cliques  
Gangs and cliques are often a result of young people looking for support and belonging. However, they can become dangerous when acceptance depends upon negative or antisocial behavior. If you believe your child might be exposed or attracted to a gang, talk about it together. Look for an opportunity—say you see an ad for a movie that makes gang life seem glamorous—and say, “You know, sometimes it seems like joining a gang might be cool. But it’s not. Kids in gangs get hurt. Some even get killed because they try to solve their problems through violence. Really smart kids choose friends who are fun to be with and won’t put them in any danger.” Many communities have programs that help prevent gang violence.

- Talk with other parents  
Help give your kids a consistent anti-violence message by speaking with the parents of your kids' friends about what your children can and cannot view or play in your homes. Ask other parents if there's a gun in their home. If there is, talk with them to make sure they've taken the necessary safety measures. Having this kind of conversation may seem uncom-

Pacific Center for Violence  
Prevention  
1001 Potrero Ave.  
San Francisco, CA 94110  
(415) 285-1793  
www.pcvp.org

### Readings for Parents and Children

Beekman, Susan and  
Jeanne Holmes.  
*Battles, Hassles, Tantrums & Tears:  
Strategies for Coping with Conflict  
and Making Peace at Home.*  
New York: Hearst Books, 1993.

Cohn, Janet and Gail Owens.  
*Why Did It Happen? Helping  
Children Cope in a Violent World.*  
Morrow Junior Books, 1994.

Dumas, Lynne S.  
*Talking With Your Child About a  
Troubled World.*  
A Faucett Columbine Book,  
Ballentine Books, 1992.

Faber, Adele and Elaine Mazlish.  
*How to Talk So Kids Will Listen &  
How to Listen So Kids Will Talk.*  
Mamaroneck, NY: International  
Center for Creative Thinking,  
1990.

Levin, Diane E.  
*Teaching Young Children in  
Violent Times: Building a  
Peaceable Classroom.*  
Educators for Social Responsibility,  
1994.

Pollack, William.  
*Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from  
the Myth of Boyhood.*  
Random House, 1998.

Robinson, Nancy.  
*Wendy and the Bullies.*  
Scholastic, 1980.

Dr. Seuss.  
*The Butter Battle.*  
Random House, 1984.

fortable, but keep in mind that nearly 40 percent of accidental handgun shootings of children under 16 occur in the homes of friends and relatives.

- Pay particular attention to boys

Most boys love action. But action need not become violence. Parents must distinguish between the two and help their boys do so as well. Allow them safe and healthy outlets for their natural energy. And recognize that talking—especially about violence—is different for boys than for girls. Boys may feel ashamed to express their real feelings about violence. Instead of sitting down for a “talk,” initiate the topic while the two of you are engaged in an activity he enjoys. Provide privacy for these conversations. And be ready to listen when he's ready to talk, even if the timing isn't ideal. (Pollack, *Real Boys*, 1998.)

- Ask the schools to get involved

Find out about your school's violence prevention efforts. Encourage the teaching of conflict-resolution skills and “peer mediation” programs (where children counsel other children). Suggest training teachers in de-escalating and preventing violence.

- Get additional support and information

We hope you have found this information helpful. If you still want more information, contact any of these organizations listed or go to the library or bookstore and check out these books for parents. There are lots of people you can talk with like doctors, teachers, members of the clergy or other parents.

### What do I do if a kid at school is picking on me?

A bully usually feels badly about himself and that's why he picks on people. I know you want to stand up to him, but try hard not to get mad or let him provoke you. If you feel like you can handle it, try to stand tall and say, “I'm not going to fight with you.” But remember, you don't have to handle it on your own. I'm there for you and if you need me to talk with your teacher or principal, I will.

### What do I do if I see someone bring a gun to school?

If you ever see a gun anywhere, never touch it. It is important that you tell an adult—like your teacher or us, right away. That way, you'll stay safe and help make sure no one else gets hurt.



## Questions & Answers

# 10 Tips

## for Talking With Your Kids About Tough Issues

1. Start early.
2. Initiate conversations with your child.
3. Listen to your child.
4. Address any fears.
5. Create an open environment.
6. Communicate your own values.
7. Try to be honest.
8. Be patient.
9. Use everyday opportunities to **Talk**.
10. **Talk** about it again. And, again.

## The Campaign

*Talking With Kids About Tough Issues* is a national initiative by Children Now and the Kaiser Family Foundation to encourage parents to talk with their children earlier and more often about tough issues like sex, HIV/AIDS, violence, alcohol and drug abuse.

The campaign includes public service messages that have appeared in major media outlets from *The New York Times* to network television broadcasts such as NBC's *Today Show*, corporate and media partners, and event sponsorship through organizations such as the Boys & Girls Clubs and PTAs. The campaign provides free resources for parents, including the *Talking With Kids* guide and Web site, which includes listings of national and local parent resources.

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[www.kff.org](http://www.kff.org)

VISIT THE WEB SITE:  
[www.talkingwithkids.org](http://www.talkingwithkids.org)

FOR A FREE BOOKLET ON TALKING WITH KIDS CALL:  
1-800-CHILD44

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