



Talking about sensitive topics with your child and the school

Sensitive or controversial topics will always exist in our ever-changing world. Families and schools don't exist in a vacuum; they are part of communities and wider society. As a parent, you are your child's first teacher, and you may find that sensitive issues are first raised in the family environment.

What are sensitive topics and why are they taught in school?

Schools now play an active role in educating students in areas of sensitivity, including sexuality, respectful relationships, mental health, grief, loss and child protection. Many educators and parents would agree that teaching students how to deal with sensitive topics is an important part of schooling.

Sensitive topics

Think about the following topics. Which of them do you regard as sensitive or 'controversial'?

- Climate change
- Gender equality
- Equality of educational opportunity
- Poverty
- Immigration
- The definition of marriage
- Sexual orientation
- Alcohol and drugs
- Birth control and abortion
- Mental health issues
- Death

Including sensitive topics in education can help to provide a safe, structured setting where ideas and viewpoints can be discussed. This supports young people to develop the skills to make informed, evidence-based decisions beyond the classroom, without resorting to aggression or violence.

Dealing with controversy in the classroom can help students to see that it is possible, and even healthy, to disagree with one another while still behaving respectfully. The Australian Curriculum provides [information for parents](#) about how the curriculum can help prepare children and young people to learn, live and engage fully in life.

Your role as a parent

As a parent you have an important role in supporting the safety and wellbeing of your child. It can be hard, confronting and even embarrassing to talk about sensitive topics, but open communication with your child strengthens the trusting relationship you have developed and sends a powerful message to them.

Discussion tips

Here are some tips for discussing sensitive topics with children.

- Stay calm and be prepared to listen if your child wants to talk to you about something.
- Your child trusts you, so it's important that you aren't critical or judgmental.
- Some discussions need to happen straight away, but if your child raises something controversial, you could set up a time for a more considered discussion. This can give you some time to gather your thoughts and potentially diffuse overreactions. Remember, some topics are not easily 'solved'.
- Do some research if you feel unsure or are not confident about a topic.
- Set some boundaries to facilitate a respectful discussion.
- Teenagers might not want you to fix anything – they might just want to talk. You could offer different or counter viewpoints through multiple lenses to help them consider the issue critically.
- Present hypothetical questions that ask your child to think critically and creatively about 'what if', 'what would happen' and 'what could happen' in situations linked to the issue under discussion. Prompt and encourage your child to express and share what they believe, feel or think.
- Be open to seeking help. You're not alone and are not expected to solve every issue. Your child's teachers, the school counsellor and wellbeing coordinator can help you access support services in your local area.

Raising sensitive matters with your child's teacher

Warm, trusting and collaborative relationships can help you to feel respected and valued, and can help teachers to better understand and respond to the needs of each member of their class. Students may feel a greater sense of belonging and connection, enhancing their overall wellbeing and leading to improved learning outcomes.

Effective communication is the key to positive partnerships between parents and the school, especially when communicating about sensitive issues or topics. If you have concerns about your child and want advice from the school, you can raise these with the school. For example:

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- My child is struggling with schoolwork.
 - I'm worried my child is being bullied.
 - My partner and I have recently separated and my children aren't coping.
 - My child has been seeing a counsellor for mental health issues – what should I tell the school? I don't want him to be labelled.
 - I have a gut feeling that something's wrong ... My teenage daughter seems switched off and doesn't want to talk to me anymore.
 - He's just started school and has been diagnosed as having ASD ... I want to make sure his teacher and the other kids understand his quirky personality and how to help him.

Ways to communicate

Here are some simple tips to help you talk to your child's teacher about sensitive topics.

- Establish an effective and respectful relationship by being calm, warm and open. This will make discussions much easier and will build a two-way reciprocal process.
- Come prepared with the information you want to share or the questions you want to ask.
- Arrange a time that suits you both if you think you need a longer discussion.
- Keep the channels of communication open and consider ways you might become involved in the school, such as volunteering, social activities, school clubs and parent groups and committees.

Information and advice

- [Communicating with your teenager](#)
- [Difficult conversations with teenagers](#)
- [Problem-solving strategies for parents and teachers](#)
- [Talking to your parents or other adults](#)