

How to Have Tough Family Conversations

From The Jed Foundation website (www.jedfoundation.org)

We will all experience issues within our family, whether it's a squabble with a sibling or a larger conflict like divorce. Whatever the issue, a key ingredient in resolving disputes with family members is healthy family communication: talking about an issue clearly, directly, and with empathy.

Tips for Getting Ready for Tough Family Conversations

When you need to have a conversation with a family member about a difficult subject, it's easy to feel anxious about the conversation even before it starts. If you are feeling anxious or nervous, there are some ways to help prepare for the conversation in advance:

Identify the Main Topic

Sometimes one difficult topic is connected to other issues, especially in families with a history of unresolved conflicts. Rather than trying to cover every topic at once, for your first conversation it may help to focus on one issue—the most recent, or the most important. Staying on one topic can help guide the conversation, keep you on task, and keep your family member from feeling overwhelmed or criticized.

For example, let's say your sister is teasing you about your appearance and taking your stuff without asking. Instead of tackling both of those issues at once, choose one to start with and resolve one before moving onto the other. It's often easier to start with the most recent issue, because you can address behavior that's happening in the moment.

Prepare Your Points

It can help to write down what you want to say before you say it. To help organize your thoughts, use the technique of identifying Who, What, Where, When, How, and Why. For example, let's say you and your mother have been having arguments about your performance at school and you want to talk to her about it. Here's how using this technique might look:

- Who does the conversation involve? Me and my mom.
- What happened? She started criticizing my last test score in math and told me I wasn't working hard enough.

- Where and when? It happened when she was driving me to school yesterday.
- How did that make you feel? It made me feel even more stressed out about going to class, and it made me feel stupid because I'm already trying really hard in the class.
- Why do you want to talk about it? I want to talk about it because I want her to understand that I am working hard. I know she wants me to do well in the class but when I try to study I remember the mean things she said and it makes it hard to focus.
- What might the other person's perspective be? My mom wants the best for me and she may be concerned that my grades will affect my chances at getting into the college of my choice.
- What is your proposed solution? It would be better if we were on the same side and could look into tutoring or afterschool programs together, so that I can do better.

Brainstorming a potential solution to the problem is a helpful step, because it shows your family member that you are looking for a resolution rather than to blame or criticize them. You can also ask for their help in coming to a compromise that would work for both of you.

Learn Effective Family Communication Techniques

Conflicts with family members can be stressful and bring up a lot of emotions. The goal is to be able to work through issues with [open and honest communication](#). The next time you need to have a difficult conversation with [family](#), try the following techniques:

- Practice discernment: Learning when to address an issue and when to step away is a really important and useful skill. If the issue is important to you, carries important consequences for you or others, or continues to arise as an issue, it is likely worth pursuing.
- Reframe the argument: Assuming that others involved want what is best for everyone affected, even if they have different perspectives, can increase your ability to see other perspectives and make it easier to find compromises.
- Take time to understand what is happening for you. Sometimes it is hard to be honest because we do not really understand what is happening for us or someone else. Taking time to sort through our own feelings and underlying issues makes being honest easier.
- Be honest: When sharing your feelings, do your best to remain calm and respectful, and focus on the issue at hand.
- Take breaks and take turns: Taking turns addressing your points and not speaking over others may keep an argument from escalating.
- Set boundaries: An important part of resolving a conflict and preventing future conflicts is setting limits to protect your time, energy, and feelings.

All of these techniques take practice and participation from others, but with the right guidance and support, it is possible to have healthier and more effective family communication.

Tips for Sensitive Family Conversations

Sometimes, the conflicts we have with family members go beyond homework or curfews—sometimes they are about more sensitive topics, like identity or family biases. If you need to have a sensitive conversation with a family member, you can use the same techniques outlined above, with some additional considerations depending on the subject.

Talking about Sexuality or Coming Out to Your Family

If you are part of the LGBTQIA+ community, coming out to family members about your [sexual orientation](#) or [gender identity](#) can be fraught depending on how open and receptive you expect your family to be. If you are nervous about coming out to your family, using the techniques outlined above may help you feel prepared to start the conversation in a safe and honest way. There are also additional resources, like this [handbook from the Trevor Project](#), that can help you navigate the conversation.

No matter how your family reacts, it's important to remember:

- Your sexuality and gender are valid regardless of whether you come out or not.
- You are allowed to prioritize your physical, mental, and emotional safety over coming out.
- You can come out to who you want, at your own pace.
- You are not alone, and there are support systems in place to keep you mentally and physically safe.

Confronting Bigotry in Your Family

We all have [biases to unlearn](#)—and some people are more open to unlearning harmful ideas than others. Trying to address bigotry in your family, such as racism, homophobia, ableism, or misogyny, can be a complicated process. While one conversation alone likely won't fix the issue, here are some effective ways to [start a conversation with a family member](#) about their [biases](#):

- Describe what is happening from your perspective, whether it's a single remark or action, or part of a pattern of behavior.
- Be honest about how their actions make you feel.
- State values and set limits. Explain that respect and tolerance are important personal values—and they may be important family values, too. Ask them not to repeat the behavior in front of you.
- Involve other family members. Feedback about bias is sometimes hard to hear. Consider including other family members in the discussion. To whom is your family member most likely to listen? Are there family members whose opinions differ from yours respectfully?
- Put it in writing. If spoken words and actions don't have an effect, or if you don't feel safe having a direct conversation, consider writing a note, letter, or email.

- Appeal to family ties. Emphasize that the relationship is important to you and their biases are causing harm to the relationship.

For some sensitive conversations, it may be helpful to involve a third party, like another family member, a trusted family friend, or a mental health professional. This person can help mediate a discussion, provide a neutral perspective, and keep family communication from becoming unproductive.

It's not always easy to learn or practice good family communication, especially if you come from a family that has unresolved issues or a difficult history. Learning and practicing how to approach tough family conversations with clarity, directness, and empathy can help resolve issues and strengthen family relationships.

Related Content

[Unpacking Family Drama](#)

[How to Improve Communication Skills in Your Relationships](#)

[Understanding Gender Identity](#)

[Understanding Sexual Orientation](#)

[Understanding Discrimination and Bias](#)

[Responding to Discrimination and Bias](#)