



Life Actually By Kari Kampakis

Setting the first tracks: How to have hard conversations with your kids

Imagine your child at the top of a ski slope. They're about to ski down for their first time, but for now, they're relishing the view.

A blanket of snow just fell, so the view is fresh and pure. The fluffy white snow is completely blemish-free. It's a wondrous sight, but it's temporary. Because pretty soon, skiers will start sailing down this hill. Each one will set tracks in the snow that impact your child's perspective.

Whoever skis down first, setting the *first tracks* in the snow, will leave a particularly deep impression because chances are, your child will remember it.

This ski slope is a lot like your child's mind. And as parents, we instinctively protect their mind. We keep our kids in safe environments and guard their innocence to the best of our ability.

And though this is a great instinct, we must remember that our kids will be exposed to things sooner than we like to believe. In mere seconds, their pristine view of the world can be interrupted by a peer, a Google search, or some random event that leaves a negative mark.

"Setting the first tracks" is a term that Gil Kracke, a counselor at Covenant Counseling and the Church of the Advent in Birmingham, uses to encourage parents to have those uncomfortable yet necessary conversations. As parents, we want to set the first tracks. We want to ski down first and impress the truth in our kids' minds so that when other skiers come behind us, our kids know which tracks to trust.

Establishing ourselves upfront as the authority helps us become our child's go-to person. It lets them know they can come to us with questions to help them discern which tracks in the snow are healthy and right – and which ones aren't.

But how do we begin these awkward

conversations? How do we talk about those hard realities we'd rather not talk about?

According to David Thomas, a counselor with DayStar Counseling in Nashville, and author of the book "Wild Things", parents should get in front of the issues. We should have these discussions *before* an event ever happens.

Gone are the days of a single "birds and the bees" talk. Instead of a one-time conversation, there should be ongoing dialogue. We should create a safe space where our kids feel comfortable opening up and asking the questions they'll inevitably take somewhere – if not to us, then to a friend or Google.

Here are eight guidelines Thomas offers to help parents create a safe environment that encourages openness and honesty:

- ▶ **Start early.** Between ages 3-5, we can begin conversations with our kids about their bodies. The goal is to familiarize kids with the language and get them comfortable talking about it on an age-appropriate level.
- ▶ **Be the first and best source of information.** To be our child's go-to person, we should communicate a sense of safety so they instinctively come to us when they want information. Our kids can read us, and if we look or act awkward, they'll quit talking. For this reason, we need to be familiar with the realities of their world (current and what's to come) and comfortable talking about them.
- ▶ **Always use anatomically correct words when talking about the body.**
- ▶ **Invite questions.** One way to encourage conversation is to tell our kids, "I'm so glad

you asked me that. Anything else you want to ask?" Or, we can ask them questions like, "What were you thinking when you heard that?" Oftentimes, helping our kids think through a situation helps them form their own conclusions.

- ▶ **Revisit the conversation often.** Upfront our kids should hear, "We're going to come in and out of this conversation your whole life. It's not a one-time thing, but rather an ongoing healthy discussion." To keep the talks informal and nonthreatening, Thomas suggests an occasional "Dude's Weekend" or "Girl's Night." We can spend the night at a hotel, for instance, and weave the dialogue into fun experiences like letting our child swim, eat pizza and watch a movie.
- ▶ **Stay a step ahead of his/her development.** We shouldn't wait until our child hits puberty to discuss puberty. Kids need to hear "You are normal," and when we prepare them for what's to come, they don't panic over the changes they experience because they know what to expect.
- ▶ **Put it in a physical and spiritual context.** It's important for kids to know their bodies are holy and good, and their journey to manhood/womanhood is part of God's plan. It's when we use our bodies and minds in ways that God never intended that problems occur.
- ▶ **Find books to read together.** Books can be helpful in opening the door to hard conversations. Remember, however, that books should be used to facilitate conversation, not replace it.

And what if you aren't your child's first memory? What if that kid from school who likes

to educate all the other kids on nitty-gritty topics beats you in setting the first tracks?

If that's the case, don't worry, because it's never too late to start talking. Even if you aren't your child's first memory, you can be *most* of their memories.

Hard conversations take courage, and I know how uncomfortable they can be. What helps me stay brave is remembering what a school counselor once told me about parents who have open dialogue versus parents who think they're "protecting" their kids by not addressing hard realities.

"Parents who have the hard conversations are much more likely to have their kids open up and tell them what's *really* going on," she said. "Parents who don't have those conversations are less likely to have their kids open up because the kids know their parents will freak out."

In short, our kids need us speaking truth into their lives. They need guidance to help them discern which tracks in the snow are worth paying attention to.

By making hard conversations a normal part of family life, we can get past the awkwardness. We can develop stronger relationships that allow us access into their world and open up our eyes, minds and hearts to the realities they'll face in the winding road ahead.

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