Big Questions, Worries, and Fears:
How to have hard conversations with little children
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Meet the Author

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“For the very first time the young are seeing history being made before it is censored by their elders.”
-Margaret Mead
It starts with the “Why?”

Preparation is key...

- Family partnership
- General check-in questions
  - “How is Malik doing at home?”
  - “I have not seen Mom in a few days. How is she doing?”
  - “Bailey seems quiet this morning. How was her weekend?”
- Parent conversation starters
Approaching the Conversation

Talk to families first

Follow the family’s desired approach

Expect the unexpected

Pause

Use open-ended questions

Note your nonverbal response

The Unexpected Question at the Unexpected Time

A
• Acknowledge

A
• Affirm

A
• Ask

B
• Be there

Other Important Considerations

Developmental Level of the Child

Understanding of Time and Future Events

Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication

Confidentiality and Privacy

Your Own Comfort Level
More Important Considerations

- Environment and Context
- Considerations of Family or Supportive Framework
- Words Used by Family and Known by Child
- Timeframe of the Concern
- Child's Understanding of the Impact

Poll Questions

Miscarriage

In those first few weeks of pregnancy, you mock up an entire life — who the baby is going to look like, where it’s going to go to college. That’s the loss we suffered.

-Kirstie Alley
Processing the Loss

**Adults**
- Grief cycle
- Compounded by potential unknown grieving
- Partner struggles
- Withdrawal

**Young Children**
- Lack of conceptual understanding
- Feelings of blame
- Silence

**Parent Approaches...**

- "Thank you for sharing this with me. I am very sorry. Is this something you think Hiram will bring up? If he does, what would you like me to say to him?"

- "I understand that this is a sensitive time for you and your family. I do have a resource here at the school with information that may help you talk with Colette and Sasha about this in case they have questions at home. Would you like me to give you a copy?"
**Child Initiates...**

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**Note:** Conversations with young children should be child-initiated. Do not initiate a discussion about a sensitive topic unless directed to do so by family.

Cal, to another child: "My mommy was going to have a baby but it died."

**Teacher, Ms. Kim (later):** "I heard you talking to Sanjay about your mommy. I care a lot about you and your mommy. If you want to talk to me, I am here. Would you like a hug?"

**Goal:** Presence and emotional comfort

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**Child Initiates...**

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Tyson, to teacher: "We're not having a baby anymore."

**Mr. Xavier:** "I did not know that. Thank you for telling me. How do you feel about that?"

• **Goal:** Emotion identification

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**Child Initiates...**

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Eva, to teacher (during circle time): "Did you know my mom isn't going to have a new baby? Where did Mommy's baby go?"

**Ms. Selena:** "Thank you for telling me this, Eva. I want to talk to you and answer your question. Let's finish circle time and then we can talk."

**Ms. Selena, to Eva (later):** "I understand that you have questions about your Mom's baby. How are you feeling?"

**Goal:** Support and maintaining focus in group time

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Following Up

Ms. Kim, to Sanjay: “You shared with me earlier that you were sad your mommy was not going to have a new baby right now. Would you like to talk more about this?” (pause) “Or maybe you’d like to paint a picture of how you are feeling?”

Following Up

Ms. Kim, to Sanjay’s family: “I wanted to share with you a conversation I had with Sanjay earlier. In speaking with me, he shared that his mommy was not having a baby anymore. I assured him that he could talk to me and I asked him how he was feeling. Is there anything I can do to support your family? How would you like me to respond to Sanjay if he brings this up again? I do have a resource here at school if that would be helpful.”

Support for Families

• Talking with the Child
• Developmentally appropriate
• Answering the question asked or addressing the behavior seen
• Simple and honest responses
• Labeling emotions
• PAUSE
"I think you saw Mommy crying. Mommy and I are sad because we are not going to have a new baby right now. We both love you very much."

Preparation is Key...

Questions to Expect; Answers to have Ready

- **Question**: "Why isn't Mommy having the baby?"
- **Answer**: "Mommy and I wanted to have the baby but the baby did not grow. We hope a new baby will start to grow someday."

Note: Avoid metaphors. Religious teachings may be shared, if fitting with family beliefs. Consider consulting with a religious leader for advice on how to help address needs.
Questions to Expect; Answers to have Ready

- **Question:** “Why didn’t the baby grow?”
  - **Answer:** “We do not know why. You did grow when you were a baby, and you are growing healthy and strong. We are very happy for that.”

- **Question:** “Why is Mama sad?”
  - **Answer:** “Mama and I love you very much. We wanted to have a brother or sister for you, and we will have to wait. That makes us both feel sad. We are glad we have you.”

Working with young children means always being prepared for the unexpected question at the unexpected time.

Unexpected Questions/Responses... and Why

- Lack of life experience
- Lack of understanding of social norms
- Underdeveloped sense of empathy

Child: “At least no one else is going to die.”

Adult: “You are correct that we are all safe. Mommy and I are still very sad that we are not going to have another baby right now.”
Unexpected Questions/ Responses... and Why

Child: “That’s ok, I don’t want a baby.”
Adult: “Mommy and I are feeling sad because we did want a baby. But we are so happy that we have you, because we love you very much. Can you help me think of something we can do to show Mommy how much we love her?”

Child: (silence)
Adult: “I am here if you want to talk with me. Would you like a hug?”

Resources for Families

- Families need support to support children – partnership
- How to explain in developmentally appropriate ways
- Questions to expect with possible answers
- Children’s books, websites, and organizations to support

Poll Questions