

Talking to kids about...

unease, stress and trauma

Talking to kids about... is meant to encourage you to try. Because just the attempt to make discussing difficult topics possible means preventing violence, manipulation, sexual assault, discrimination and confusion. It also strengthens kids, no matter if they are actively listening or not. They know that they can talk to you about important things. This is because you dare to discuss unusual, maybe uncomfortable or burdensome topics.

Below you can find Information and example sentences for conversations with kids regarding unease, stress and trauma responses.

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When a child shows (possible) signs of trauma (e.g. frequent and strong freak outs, hitting their head against the wall, masturbating constantly and compulsively, drifting away and being unable to be reached etc.), they need professional help. It's not part of the role of a caregivers or teacher to treat a child's trauma. That's up to therapists and other professionally trained people. But even in the day to day life pedagogues, parents and others can do a lot to support traumatised children. When it comes to extreme and/or strange behaviour from a child, it's important for teachers and caregivers to first of all take pause and

consider that this could be a trauma response. That means that it's probably not a conscious decision on the child's part and that they can't help it at that moment. With this possibility or thesis in the back of your mind, it's mostly about stabilising, providing relief as well as help with speaking and sorting through feelings and situations.

Talking to kids about... takes practice, time, here a few minutes, there a quarter of an hour, sometimes, just a few seconds. Either way, it takes practice. Try it. It will become easier and more commonplace.

This folder is part of a series about the following 5 topics:

1. children's rights & and help against violence
2. sexual infringements among kids & consent explained simply
3. confusion & irritation caused by the behaviour of adults
4. Sex education & dealing with pornography
5. Unease, stress & trauma

The series "talking to kids about..." was developed by the team at Selbstlaut to improve conversations about difficult topics with kids who are around the primary school age. Some things may also be appropriate for kids aged 12 or 13. As a whole however, teens need different phrases which you will not be able to find in this collection.

Traumatised kids often feel like they're constantly failing and messing up because they can't manage to change their tiring, strange, inexplicable behaviour. Such a constant feeling of defeat weakens children additionally. That's why adults should focus on resources and strengths of each individual child and mirror them to the child. This takes a lot of understanding, compassion, stamina and patience.

Help talking and sorting through feelings

When it comes to adults providing help with finding words and sorting through feelings, it's not about discussing the traumatic event itself with the child. It's much more about trying to get to talking with the child about their behaviour and the feelings that go with that. That's how adults can give the child words for something that is so hard to grasp and understand. They show understanding for the behaviour of the child. This helps the afflicted child to understand and accept themselves a little more.

Relief

A central message is that the behaviour of the child is likely a normal reaction to very difficult situations that should not be normal. The underlying attitude is: "It's not you who is wrong, but the possible reasons for your behaviour is wrong." and "There's a good reason for every behaviour."

Example sentences for explaining trauma to children:

Some kids have experienced really difficult things in their lives. Like war. Or violence at home. Or parents who weren't good to each other and fought a lot and viciously. Or the loss of a really important person, because that person died or went away. Or adults who didn't take care of kids, or touched a child weirdly and confusingly.

Even if that happened a long time ago, it can still happen that a child feels like they're back in that difficult situation. That may not actually be possible, because now is a different time, but there can be feelings in the head or body that make it seem like everything is back to how it was before. That can happen in the middle of the day when the child is doing something else entirely. What happened then, suddenly shows up like a picture, or a movie in their head.

The body remembers

Sometimes kids can't remember exactly what happened. Their memory is like a thick fog. The body has its own memory. The body can for example remember a smell or a room. When the child smells that smell again, or sees a similar room, they suddenly feel the same feelings as back then. The child gets stressed and scared, their breathing goes faster, their heart starts racing. Or the child gets really really angry. Or they travel somewhere far away in their head and can't remember any of it afterwards.

Sometimes the body also remembers a person who wasn't good to the child and who the child was afraid of. When the child then sees someone who looks like that person or moves like that person, the child can feel a lot of stress again, even though it's not the same person as back then.

All of this is difficult to understand. Do you have questions?

I think that you sometimes feel like that, so it's good to try and think together about what exactly triggers such feelings or memories or body-memories in you. Maybe then we can do something so you don't get so angry so often anymore, or so you don't get so scared or stressed anymore.

Alertness

One sign for trauma can be over-excitation - when kids are hyperactive, can't settle down at all, and are hyper-alert constantly. This trauma symptom is often confused for ADHD and gets misdiagnosed frequently. In any situation that is perceived to be life threatening, the body automatically releases a lot of adrenaline so we can flee the situation, or fight. When neither are possible, the body freezes. Then the energy that was provided for fight or flight gets saved in the body and can't be worked off. When humans remain in this state and are constantly over excited they keep feeling easily threatened and endangered, even though they have been safe for a long time.

You could explain that to a child like this:

I've noticed that you're often very active and you can't calm down. Like a volcano that's close to erupting. Like there's lots of energy inside you and you yourself sometimes don't know what to do with this energy and how to get rid of it.

Maybe it feels like there's an alarm bell inside you that's constantly going off. Or something in your body is shouting: "Warning, warning, caution, danger!". Or like when you pull the parking break in a car and step on the gas at the same time.

Sometimes I notice that even the smallest bit of stress, or a situation that's just a little tense but not dangerous feels very threatening and unsafe to you.

I can imagine that that's incredibly exhausting. I often tell you to calm and slow down. But maybe you can't help being so fast and stressed. If that's the case, it's totally annoying if I constantly berate you, because you can't change it.

I know of some kids who have an inner alarm system and have a hard time keeping agreements. Some of them have had difficult stuff happen to them in the past. Like maybe they were sick and had to stay a lot or had to stay in the hospital for a long time. Or their mother had a very difficult birth. Or nobody talked to the child at home, or comforted them when they felt lonely. Or they experienced violence, being hit, shouted at, threatened, or being touched weirdly between their legs, on the but, or penis, or vagina. Even though these difficult situations may be long over, their alarm system is still turned on in their body and it feels like there's no button to turn it off.

Agreements

I'll think about how I can support you and what we can do together so it's easier for you and so you feel less stressed. In situations where you get very excited I'll try not to burden you more or pressure you. And I'll try to remind you that you are safe and that in that moment there is no threat or danger. We'll have very clear rules for a day, a week, so you know what's going on.

What do you think would help you in a situation like this? What would calm you down?

Emergency box

Maybe we could craft an emergency box together that you can fill with things that help you calm down: for example a stress ball, a picture you like looking at and that gives you strength, a special stuffed animal, a nice smell, or a snack you like...

Anger

Sometimes children experience strong rage, or throw a tantrum and it's hard to stop them. Anger and tantrums are to a certain extent part of a child's development. When tantrums become too extreme, too frequent, and happen for an unusually long span of time, you could try to help the child sort through the rage.

I've noticed that you're often very angry. Sometimes you get so angry that you can't be stopped. As if you're caught in that feeling and it's hard to get out of that. I'm sure there's a good reason why you're so angry. Maybe you're angry because I said No to something. Or because someone made you angry, your teacher, or another child. Maybe you had a fight. Maybe you're angry because someone yelled at you or hit you. Maybe you're angry because something happened in your past and you feel reminded of it for some reason. Maybe it's something else entirely. I want to discuss it with you and try to think of what we can do so you don't get so angry for so long. It's important to me that you feel good and safe.

Dissociation

There's one form of trauma response called dissociation - a drifting away from the here and now. Children's feelings are caught in the traumatic experience again. That's very confusing for kids. Sometimes they can't remember the span of time during which they dissociated, or they only remember parts of it, or it's very fuzzy.

Dissociation is very complicated and can be expressed in different ways. If possible Dissociation should be stopped. It's harmful and debilitating. For the child. But also for other kids in the group or class who feel the force, but of course can't make sense of what they're feeling or seeing.

Dissociation can be explained as follows:

Sometimes when everything around us is way too much, too confusing, our whole body screams "I can't stand this anymore!" and shuts down. Like a fuse that blows. It feels like you're no longer in this world, as if you travelled far away in your head or your feelings. As if you're a ghost. Without a body or feelings, without a soul. As if you're watching yourself from above like a different person. Or as if you're wrapped up in cotton and you barely notice anything from the outside world. Sometimes it's hard to return to the here and now. At that moment it's hard to think or speak. And often you can't remember what just happened or where you were just now. When you return to the here and now you're often very tired and exhausted.

Stopping Dissociation

Such a state is neither good for any child or adult nor for you. When you get into a state like that again I want to try to bring you back to the here and now. I'll talk to you and tell you where you are, how old you are, and who I am. Maybe I can give you something to smell. Or hand you an object to touch. Or I'll try touching you briefly on your shoulder or arm, so you get out of that state. How does that sound to you? What do you think would be helpful for you?

The undertow of trauma

Trauma is a highly complex topic. It's very challenging and often tiring to accompany traumatised kids. It takes clear boundaries, lots of structure and great clarity to stabilise the afflicted. And also to not be drawn into what can be described as the pull or undertow of trauma. Get support for yourself. Exchange experiences with others, take breaks. That way you can more easily give support and strength to traumatised children.