Talking to kids about…

sex education and dealing with pornography

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 questions about sexuality and dealing with pornography.

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Even if it's hard: as soon as kids are confronted with digital media, us adults are required to address pornography. This needs to happen of our own volition, because it's only a matter of time before kids are confronted with such images. If kids know that these pictures can pop up unsolicitedly and that they are like action movies, meaning that these are actors acting things out, it's already easier to deal with weird feelings, or disgust and confusion.

Even among kids at the primary school age, watching porn (together) can be a test of courage. Or a competition: who can watch the grossest videos. Usually these images are scary though, and trigger shame.

The more kids know and the more they learn being aware of themselves, their bodies and their needs, the less pornographic imagery can influence them.

Be the one to address things in daily life and actively add information to everything kids see, feel or (already) know, but consider taboo.

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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

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Sex education

Expressions and words for body parts and genitalia, different ways of living and desiring, information regarding puberty and the changes happening to the body, as well as brief and factually correct answers to questions children ask is part of sex education the way numbers are part of mathematics. Playing doctor, looking at each other, giving oneself pleasant and tingly sensations, imitating adults, splashing around naked in the bath and many other things are expressions of childish sexual activities. They are commonplace.

But why should you already bring this up with primary school aged kids?, you may ask.

Children under the age of 10 are part of the age group most afflicted with sexual abuse. Adults who sexually abuse kids often use unfulfilled childish curiosity to entangle kids in sexual discussions and acts and manipulate them to get into sexually abusive situations.

Sex education protects and strengthens. If children know about topics surrounding intimacy and (child) sexuality and learn to talk about every body part without fear or shame, the hurdle of confiding to someone about sexual violence they may experience is much smaller.

If kids have questions regarding sexual topics, try to give short, accurate answers. There is no such thing as THE ONE talk.

What's sex anyway?

What should I say? For example:

The word sex stands for sexual acts. That's when older teenagers, or adults touch each other in a way that arouses them, on their genitals or other parts of the body that feel tingly.

Adults are not allowed to do that with kids. Older kids and teenagers also aren't allowed to. That is forbidden.

Conception

If your/ a child asks how babies get into the belly, they want an answer to that. They neither want a lecture, nor hear about sex positions, nor do they want to be told "later" and they don't want you to ask "Why do you ask?" or "Where did you get that from?".

Instead try these examples:

Babies can be conceived when a sperm cell meets an egg cell. Sperm cells come out of the penis. That's not urine, but a different, whiteish liquid. When this liquid gets into the vagina, a pregnancy can happen. Usually this happens when adults have sex together. They lie in bed for example, maybe on top of each other. They are naked and touch each other in a way that arouses them, on their genitalia or other parts of the body that feel tingly. They move around a lot, and during this the liquid can come out of the penis into the vagina.

Laughter and shame

Embarrassing words, weird phrases, sexualised swear words or incomprehensible technical terms - this is usually what children hear from adults about sexuality. Making it possible to talk about just that can be a big relief for kids and helps them find their way among everything that's confusing. When grownups for instance, make sexualised jokes while kids are there, that could be an opportunity to talk to kids about that,

E.g. as follows:

Adults always think that kids laugh all the time when sexuality is talked about. But most of the time adults also laugh about it. They don't really manage to talk to kids about questions kids have about sexuality, because they aren't used to it. Or maybe they're embarrassed, or maybe they think kids aren't interested in any of that. Or maybe because they've never thought about which words and sentences make sense and are good for kids and and which ones are only okay for other adults. It's not so easy to keep those things apart.

It bothered me today that X person made so many jokes about sexuality and made a stupid face when he said it. I should have said something and stopped him, but I didn't know how best to do that. Now I'm annoyed that I didn't say anything.

Grownups shouldn't tell kids in any detail about their own grownup sexuality, or make jokes like that. That can be confusing for kids, or make them feel uncomfortable or embarrassed. Either way it's not okay. Sometimes also for other adults, by the way.

Adults are not allowed to tell kids any secret things about sexuality and they are not allowed to ask kids to keep secrets.

Grownups should try, though, to answer the questions kids have about sexuality in a short and correct way and not tell kids false things.

Sometimes it's easier to talk about it in school than it is at home. But if you have questions, or if something is bothering you, or is especially interesting to you, I will try my best to answer you.

Pornography

What if children were confronted with pornographic images or videos against their will, or at least without the option to knowingly consent? Such images can disgust, irritate, but also be funny or trigger arousal which confuses kids. Address these conflicting feelings that such images may trigger. Don't pretend as if these images didn't exist. Children need guidance and the opportunity to express feelings of discomfort or curiosity, or just be confused.

A lot of the time pornographic depictions paint a picture of sexuality and lust that has more to do with power, force and violence, than sexuality. For instance, they often claim that women find violence arousing. These depictions are rarely about feelings. What is especially inappropriate for children is that pornography thwarts or prevents one's own fantasies, wishes, desires and needs. Overwhelmingly, normalised pictures that are made to turn a profit, interfere with desire that has yet to develop.

Porn is often also violent towards minority groups. They are racially charged, humiliating for specific groups of persons and train viewers to fantasise about superiority and inferiority.

For children pornography is problematic, because it is made for adults exclusively, and often ties sexuality to violence and presents them as belonging together. Consuming pornography can be confusing and disturbing for kids. We highly recommend being open and answering questions kids have and comments they make regarding such confusing and overtaxing images. And we, as adults, are required to state that pornography unfortunately exists in the lives of kids.

But what should I say?, you may think..

When kids are occupied with pornography/sexting/nudes/online sexual assault at home, in the classroom/living community/group, teachers, social workers and parents usually don't know what exactly happened. They can't find out 100% of what went on. This is not that important though, to be able to talk about these topics and make it easier for kids to talk about them. It's less important to search for the "truth", instead try giving age-appropriate information and adding something to it. This way you become easier to assess as a person the kids can trust and you can open doors. That is much more important than asking a lot of questions,

And could sound as follows:

I've heard that there are videos being sent around in the class(room), in which you can see adults having intercourse, so having sex. Maybe some of you have received such videos or forwarded them themselves. I want to say the following about that:

Such videos are called porno videos, porn, or pornography. These videos are made for adults. Some adults watch them because they find it exciting, some don't want to see them at all. Kids and teens are not allowed to watch such videos, just as kids aren't allowed to watch horror movies, because they are confusing or too much, or scary. I know however that a lot of kids watch movies or clips like these anyway, either on purpose, or because they accidentally found them, or they were sent to them.

Porn is made by actors and it's important to know that sex is very different in reality. In such videos there is often violence and other upsetting things. If you've seen such a video it's possible you're confused. You may find it gross. Maybe it's totally embarrassing, or weird or strange. It's also possible that it feels very exciting, or funny. Or uncomfortable and appealing at the same time. All of these feelings are okay. It's important you know though for you to know that no one is allowed to send kids such videos. It's forbidden and punishable.

It's possible that you forward this video to someone else or show it to them because you're overwhelmed and really want to share that or make it go away. Kind of like a cry for help. It's possible that a kid forwards this to confuse or annoy another kid, because that's a way to feel big and powerful. It can also happen that you don't even want to watch such videos, but you still watch them again and again, and somehow can't stop. That's kind of like an addiction.

And sometimes kids watch videos like that again and again because maybe something bad happened to them, like violence. It's also a kind of violence when adults touch kids between their legs, on their penis, or on their vulva or vagina, or force kids to touch adults' genitals. No one is allowed to do that to kids.

It is also forbidden for adults or older kids to show kids porn or send it to them. Adults who do something like that make this kind of violence into a secret. When kids experience something like this, they really need help from others. It's so brave to talk about it and find help.

I don't know if any of these thoughts are true for you, but it's important that you/everyone feels comfortable here and that's why it's important to me to talk about this with you.

For kids it makes sense to install filters on devices and search engines, but it's not a guaranteed protection.

Kids should not use devices that adults use to watch porn, or other videos that are harmful for kids unsupervised, or at all, because associated ads may pop up at any time.

Talking to kids about…

unease, stress and trauma

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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.

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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.

Talking to kids about…

Confusion and irritation regarding the behaviour of adults

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Below you can find Information and example sentences for conversations with kids regarding confusing situations and words.

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Irritations can happen when someone does or says something that confuses others. The situation starts to feel strange and uncomfortable. Often you don't know what to say. And if that what the adult said or did is funny or mean. It's especially difficult when adults act like everything is normal and don't say anything. Then kids feel bad and alone.

Recognising irritation and confusion and labelling it as such is never easy. When we as adults are role models who do this, a huge step has been made towards making it easier for kids to entrust their feelings to us when something seems strange to them.

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You are a mother, aunt, father, brother, godparent, grandparent...

You are confused by and irritated with the way a close family friend is tickling a child and creating inappropriate closeness..

What could you say...

You don't want to falsely accuse anyone, you don't want to ruin the fun for the child, most of all you want... it's not easy at all to keep a clear head.

Tickle-situations in a private setting

I can tell you have a lot of fun with X person. It looks like you get along well. I still want you to know that I find it strange how he plays with you. I'm bothered by it. He tickles you in a way that makes me wonder if it's still pleasant and fun for you. He sometimes creates a kind of special trust with you that I think about a lot. Maybe I'm making it more complicated than it is. In that case don't think about it anymore. If you yourself find it a little complicated and confusing, now you know that I for my part think about whether or not this is okay for you.

Inappropriate behaviour of a fellow teacher - an example that makes it clear how addressing strange behaviour could sound like. (even if every situation and irritation is different)

If you are e.g. a teacher and you're accompanying a primary school girl to her special tuition. There are several kids and the tutor present in the room. There is no free seat left. The tutor asks the girl to sit on his lap. The situation is strange and inappropriate. You take the student with you away from the tutor and allow her to play near the teachers' room for the rest of the school day.

What you could say to the girl

I decided to take you with me, away from the tuition class, because I found it inappropriate and not okay that the teacher suggested you sit on his lap. He should have found you a chair, or we could have thought together about where you could have sat comfortably. I'm sorry if this situation made you feel embarrassed. It's important to me that teachers don't get kids into unclear or strange situations. It's possible that the teacher didn't think about it. It's possible that he creates moments like these often to get kids to sit in his lap and feel close to them. He's not allowed to do that. I will try talking to him and telling him that I find his behaviour inappropriate. If he's doing it on purpose the head of the school will have to talk to him too. I think your parents may also be able to support you. Maybe you could tell them about this. What do you think? ...

What you could say to the other students in this tutor's class

Last week I took your fellow student away from the class with me after the tutor suggested she sit in his lap, because I found that inappropriate. I think that the teacher should make sure there are enough chairs for everyone. It's possible that some kids want to sit on his lap. It's not fair for him to create moments like these, so it feels like a competition. How did that situation feel for you? Maybe I forgot something, or didn't see something that would have been important. ...

Some general sentences for prevention about the relationship between teachers/social workers/etc. With students.

Teachers have the responsibility to take good care of every child. They can't play favourites and take less good care of others.

When a child is sad and needs to be comforted it can be good for the teacher to comfort the child by e.g. putting them on their lap.

A teacher should not, however, sit kids in their lap all the time. The school is where teachers work and it's not the place they cuddle. On top of that it's bad for the kids who don't want to sit on the teacher's lap. Especially when everything seems normal and comfortable. Who would say "I don't want this." to a teacher?

It's important to me that you kids feel comfortable at school, but also that you feel sure that every teacher and everyone else who works at the school follows the same rules.

Kids can sit on each other's laps, they can cuddle, hug, hold hands, play-fight, fall in love with each other, tell each other secrets, give each other presents, and lots more, if it feels good and right for both kids.

Teachers should never tell kids secrets. They especially can't ask kids to keep secrets.

They're not allowed to cuddle with kids.

They're not allowed to give kids presents to get the kids to do something for them.

Teachers are not allowed to confuse kids on purpose.

Those are important rules at school and it's important to me that every teacher, the partners and the kids know this. That way everyone is well-informed.

Comments by adults about the appearance or identity of a child.

You are upset with another adult for commenting and laughing about your/a child.
"I don't even know if you're a boy or a girl."

We often don't manage to tell the person that the comment wasn't funny and in fact inappropriate, or irritation, or unfriendly or just unnecessary. As adults we worry about upsetting the other person, ruining the mood, or being wrong ourselves, if the comment was actually meant to be friendly.

How could you, later, when the moment has passed, talk to the child about it? For instance:

It bothered me what X person said and how that person laughed. There are no rules about how kids should look. It's not the responsibility of kids to make sure adults are informed. Also there are lots of different ways a child can feel and present themselves.

Some adults want to control everything. Even if someone is a boy or a girl, or what country they're from, or who it should be. Who you are and who you want to be is your decision alone and it's very brave to make your own path in life.

I'm very sorry that I didn't know what to say in the moment this happened. I don't know if it even bothered you, but next time I'll try to say something. For example, I'll say that not all kids feel like a boy or a girl. And that kids can also feel in between, or different, or it can change, or at least want to feel right in their body and that such comments are not helpful for that. Instead these comments are uncomfortable. Or something like that. It's sometimes hard to find the right words. Is there something you wish for me to say if someone says something similar to you again?

Sexualised comments from adults

Someone says to your child: “When you’re grown up, you’re going to turn all the men’s/women’s heads.” Or: “If I saw you on the street I’d look twice.” Or: “It’s a shame I’m so old…” etc.

Most of the time, the adults who witness such comments laugh, regardless of whether they really think the comments are funny or embarrassing, inappropriate, shameful or irritating.

Children learn from this behaviour from adults in their environment that they should also smile or even feel honoured.

It may actually be that the child doesn‘t feel bad, but rather sees the comment as a nice compliment. However, such comments are usually embarrassing or awkward for children of primary school age.

This is often used as another source of adult amusement and jokes are made about there being no reason to blush.

Many adults know these or similar comments from their own childhood and can remember feeling uneasy. If no one intervenes, children learn that some adults create a strange atmosphere when it comes to topics related to bodies, attractiveness, sexuality and being in love.

And that other adults find it funny. This means that kids learn that that’s just how it is with adults.

Everyone seems to think it‘s normal. Children have to get used to it. Even if it is embarrassing and irritating for them.

What could you realistically say to your/the child only when the situation is over?

I was annoyed with X. He thinks that everyone and especially children find it funny when he says things like that. He’s actually talking about sexual things. He knows this isn’t appropriate. So he acted like it was a joke. So that no one tells him to stop and that that’s not okay. Adults can fall in love or look after someone or desire a sexual relationship with other adults, but not with children.

So because they know it’s not appropriate, they talk so mysteriously and laugh strangely. Such situations are confusing for everyone and especially for children. Some adults enjoy it and feel good and powerful when they confuse others.
For many other adults, this is so normal that they no longer notice it. I find it annoying and inappropriate and I don’t want an adult to confuse you and say things to you that are unclear, stupid or make you feel weird.
How was the situation for you?
If you want, we can think together about what I should say to X the next time I see him.
Of course you can also say something, but it’s not easy to stop laughing adults.

Closeness and distance

Maybe you could make closeness and distance, pleasant and uncomfortable, irritating touches an active topic at home, but also at school.

Which greeting and goodbye rituals with adults, but also with each other, do the children like? Which ones don‘t they like, and which ones would they only sometimes actively agree to. Maybe there are relatives or adult friends whose beard scratches when they kiss, who smell funny, look at the kids in a weird way, or whose greetings or comments embarrass children.

How do greetings and farewells work at school? Are they different depending on the teacher? Which forms of touch and situations with teachers in which physical contact occurs are pleasant to the children and which are not.

Talking to kids about…

Children's rights and getting help against violence

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 children's rights and getting help against violence.

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The most troubling thing for kids is when they feel that there is a difficult topic hanging in the air, but no one tells them what is going on. When they find out what is actually happening, kids know that it's not their fault, but that there are other reasons for why the world is upside down. Short statements and information is enough.

There are no patent remedies and no one right way to have these conversations with children. But there is a certainty that it strengthens children when we help them sort through their thoughts and feelings, when we help them talk and give them answers.

'And what if kids don't ask at all?' you may ask

Verbalise things in the child's daily life. Actively provide information to everything the kids see, feel or (already) know, but think of as taboo.

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Talking to children about their rights is an important part of preventing violence. Information regarding which rights children have, what they‘re allowed to do, what they need so they’re well, what adults are obligated to do for kids, what adults are allowed to do and what they may not do, as well as what kids can do when their rights are taken away, brings clarity and strengthens kids. They should know there are laws that adults of many countries have agreed on, so that kids can grow up safely and well.

Kids who know what their rights are, can feel more unburdened, if they are aware of their rights and know that adults who take away their rights are in the wrong. It makes it easier for kids to get help if possible.

You can start by talking to kids about what children’s rights they know, and by explaining the most important ones to them:

Parents and other guardians have the duty of caring for children, to tend to them. Kids have the right to a home, enough food, drink and clothes. When kids are sick, they have the right to medicine or medical help. Every child has the right to go to school, without the parents having to pay for that. Kids have the right to free time. They have to have time where they don’t have to do anything, and they can play and rest. No child may be treated weirdly, or be treated differently by adults compared to other kids. It doesn’t matter what children look like, what languages they speak, what they can or can’t do, if they’re feel like boys, or girls, or trans, or neither this nor that, which passport they have, if they have a disability, or which traits they have.

One important right for children is that they feel safe, strong and free. When and where and with whom do you feel safe? When and where do you feel strong? When and with whom do you feel free?

Some important children’s rights:

- Right to express opinions & participation
- Right to health
- The right to being cared for
- Right to protection from violence
- Right to special care & assistance in the case of disability
- Right to play & free time
- Right to equality
- Right to education
- Right to protection during war & when fleeing
- right to protection from economic & sexual exploitation

Further information about children’s rights

https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text-childrens-version

Child oriented example sentences and possible help:

War

War is one example of violence. Houses of people are destroyed and people are killed. In that case kids have the right to a new home, often in a different country.

Domestic Violence

It is also violence when kids are being hit. Parents and other adults are not allowed to hit children or to hurt them.

Sometimes it can happen that parents/guardians don’t give children enough food, or they don’t/ can’t take care of that. Or they don’t make sure kids can wash and dress, or that they don’t come near drugs. That is called neglect.

It is also a form of violence when parents insult kids, or don’t talk to them anymore. Or blame them for everything. Or say mean, hurtful things. That is called psychological, or emotional violence. This too is forbidden. It makes kids feel stupid and bad and guilty. Or makes them want to disappear.

It's always important that kids know they don't deserve that and that they have the right to be treated well.

There is also violence that isn't done to children themselves, but that they see. That makes them involuntary witnesses of violence and someone being mean. For example when one parent hits the other parent. Or laughs at them. Or insults them. Or touches them or does sex in a way the other parent doesn't want. Sometimes children hear hurtful words or threats between adults. That can be scary.

There are a lot of reasons why adults may not be good at taking care of kids. Maybe because they're sick, or have too many worries, or because they want to feel powerful, or because they themselves have experienced bad things, or because they just don't care. But adults always have a responsibility for kids. Other adults then have to jump in and be there for the child.

Sexualised violence

It's also called violence when there are inappropriate, confusing touches. So when adults touch children between their legs on their butthole, on their vulva or penis, or demand of kids that they touch adults that way. That is also forbidden.

When kids experience violence, it's their right to get help. That's why it's very important that kids can trust and confide in someone. For that to happen there need to be adults that kids can trust and who dare to get involved. That could be people in the child's family, or family friends. Or teachers, child or youth service workers, or the police. It's very brave when kids who experience violence - no matter in what form - try to get help and don't give up when someone doesn't take them seriously or doesn't listen.

Child and youth services

When parents/guardians can't take good care of kids, they themselves need help. In Austria for example there is the Kinder- und Jugendhilfe, also called child and youth services in English. They are responsible to help kids and also parents when they or other adults take away the children's right to protection from violence. The people from child and youth services talk to the parents and try to help them take good care of the children.

Crisis management centres and living communities

When children find out that a kid in their class has moved to a crisis management centre or into an assisted living community, it is often the case that no adult talks to them about it. Kids remain alone with lots of questions and possibly fears.

What should I say? you think. For example the following sentences:

X from your class has moved into a crisis management centre, you said. When kids can't stay at home anymore, because no one takes good care of them, or because there is violence, they stay at a crisis management centre for a certain time to recover from all the stress. Then it can be seen if the child goes back to their family or if they move into a living community for kids, or to foster parents. That can be very hard and sad. But it can also be a big relief for the child. The important thing is that no one is allowed to harm the child, and that includes their own parents.

A living community is a completely normal apartment with rooms, a kitchen, a living room and bathrooms etc., where a few kids live together. They live there with caretakers from child and youth services, who take special care to make sure kids have all of their rights. The kids keep going to school as usual and grow up in this kind of new family.

Did you talk about how X is doing in the living community in your class? What's on your mind?

Anger

Kids who have experienced violence are often very angry and usually feel guilty for that. Anger, fear and sadness are important feelings though, to notice anything that shouldn't be done to children. Or when no one notices anything, or no one dares to speak up or interfere and kids feel all alone.

What can you say when your/a child is very angry?

I understand that you're angry. Or: I see that you're angry. It may feel as if your head is exploding. Or maybe you want to break everything around you. When someone is that angry, they can't think anymore. I'm going to get a pillow and you can hit it. And then we'll come up with a space rocket that we'll put everyone you want to send to the moon into. We can also draw a rocket and when everyone who you want to send to the moon is in there we'll start the rocket. Boom.

Maybe you just want to be alone. I'm here, if you want to tell me later why you're angry. Or who you're angry with. Or if you just want to sit with me without talking.

If it's too hard to talk to me about it, think about who you trust. Maybe you can write a message to that person. Or call them. You don't have to tell me about it. Everything that's good for you, is good to me.

Basic first sentences to say when a child tells you about sexual abuse:

Comfort

I'm sorry that you experienced that. That someone was this mean to you.

Name it

What this person did to you is called violence (sexual abuse). No one is allowed to do that to a child.

Clarify responsibility

It's not your fault that this happened to you. The only one responsible is the one who did that. No matter what you got in return.

Recognise bravery

It's very brave that you're talking about this.

Provide knowledge

There are other kids who experience things like this. You're not alone.

Explain the next steps

I need to get help myself and then we can think together about what might be helpful for you. I'll try everything I can so you feel better and so that something like this doesn't happen again.

Don't question your/the child. When you ask questions try to leave them open. No yes/no questions, but open ones, e.g.

What do you think about the new situation? What do you think about our conversation?

What do you wish for in the near future at home (in your class/school)?...

Your/the child decides if they ever want to talk to you about the situation or not. But you can signal that it's important to you how the child is doing.

Silence only helps those who are violent. Every attempt to give kids age-appropriate information about this taboo topic that is usually considered shameful, no matter how clumsy, can be the first step out of a violent situation. It's not about cautionary tales. They make children weaker. It's about helping them speak and sort through everything they're experiencing and about giving a signal that they are not alone.

Talking to kids about…

sexual infringements and consent between children

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When we discuss sexual infringements among kids, we tend to dramatise the situation (people talk about sexual abuse, about ‘perpetrators’ and ‘victims’. In kindergartens for example the cosy corner gets shut down, there are strong conflicts between the parent of the affected child and the parents of the infringing child…), or we trivialise everything (‘nothing happened’, ‘the kids were just playing’, ‘kids should figure it out on their own’…).

First and foremost it is important to stay calm and to understand what even happened: is it a case of consensual childish sexuality, or of sexual infringement/assault? Sometimes it’s also unclear which one is the afflicted child and which one the encroaching child is. Since it is often not easy to figure all of this out, children need help from adults for sorting through the situation. Then it becomes easier for kids to understand what actually happened, which then makes it easier to name and discuss it.

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Four kinds of infringements in child-appropriate words:

1 carelessness and exuberance

Sometimes kids are curious and don't just want to look at and explore themselves and their own bodies, but also the body of another child. Sometimes the children play doctors where they might undress and examine each other naked. Kids are only allowed to play such games together when it's good for both/all kids. Sometimes one child is so excited for the game that they might run into and knock down another child, or hug them too hard, hold their hand too hard, or 'take the other kid's temperature' even though the other child does not want that. That can happen and it's not on purpose. But we should all try to be mindful of how others are doing.

2 Tilting situations

It can happen that both kids want to play such a game and that in the beginning it's nice and interesting to both and that then the good feeling changes. Like a seesaw that suddenly tilts to one side. Or a stop light that goes from green to red right away. At that moment the game needs to stop. Because it's no longer a game, when it doesn't feel good for one child. Even if the game was exciting and nice at first, no child had to keep playing. Nobody needs to be ashamed and it's nobody's fault. The seesaw just tilted. That can happen at any time.

3 Deliberate Infringements

Sometimes kids notice that the other child is no longer enjoying something, and persuade, or force them to keep playing anyway. Because kids feel strong and powerful that way. That's not okay. Sometimes the powerful child makes the other child keep it a secret or even threatens them: 'if you tell, I won't be your friend anymore, I won't play with you anymore.', 'I'll do something bad if you tattle' No one is allowed to threaten others or demand they keep secrets. Kids who do such things need to be stopped by adults.

4 infringement as 'post-traumatic play' due to sexual violence

Sometimes kids demand other kids touch them on the butt, penis or vulva or vagina, or to let them touch them there. They do this because they themselves had something weird happen to them, e.g. being touched between the legs on the butthole, or the penis or the vagina by adults. No one is allowed to do that, it is forbidden. Kids should definitely tell another adult person they like about this. Both kids definitely need help.

If you arrive at the conclusion, or fear that there have been sexual infringements, every child who is involved needs support through conversations and from adults in general, but most of all the affected child needs help.

Talking to the afflicted child

Comfort and praise are first up, e.g. as follows

I'm sorry that you experienced this. No one is allowed to touch you in ways you don't want. Neither adults nor other children. Thank you for talking (to me) about this. That's very brave and strong.

Often we don't find out what happened from the child themselves, but from other kids, or parents. If a third party tells you about the situation, inform the child about it, tell them what you know/what you heard. That way the child is less confused and can trust more easily. Try to address feelings that the child might have. It will relieve the child, strengthen their perception and help them grasp what even happened.

It may be that you're confused. It may be that you don't even know how you're feeling. It may be that you're angry. Maybe you're also a little bit proud, because you felt brave for playing such games in the beginning. Maybe you're scared that the child who didn't take good care of you won't be your friend anymore, or will threaten you. Or makes a threat come true.

You can tell me how the situation was for you.

Ask openly how the situation was for the child. If you start with that question before offering help sorting through the situation, you may be confronted with silence. Help the child assess how you would react if they did talk, and what you know and think about situations like these. Only then is it helpful to ask questions to the child, without them feeling cornered or afraid of being berated.

Talking to the infringing child

Show the infringing child clear boundaries, but also understanding and compassion. Under no circumstances should they be left with the message: "Kids are not allowed to play such games, it's all forbidden". With this approach we would prevent kids from talking to us. A more fitting message that is aligned with violence prevention would be:

It's okay when kids are naked together, look at each other and touch, as long as that's okay for both of them. When a child doesn't want that (anymore) the game needs to be stopped. We can't hurt anybody.

The infringing child needs help sorting through the situation with the help of the different forms of infringements. You can then also discuss possible motives for the infringing behaviour:

1 carelessness and exuberance

It may be that the game was very exciting for you and you were very happy and then didn't notice that the other child didn't want something. Even when a game is very exciting everyone needs to look out for each other.

We can find ways for you to feel big and strong together, without hurting other kids.

2 Tilting situations

It may be that the situation was fun for both of you at first. Maybe the other kid even started it. But then the mood changed for the other kid, it tilted like a seesaw and they didn't want to keep playing. The seesaw can always tilt. Then you need to stop even if you'd rather keep playing.

3 Deliberate Infringements

It may be that you noticed that the other child didn't want to keep playing, but continued anyway. Because you felt powerful and strong. It's not okay to make someone feel weird on purpose. We can't make another child feel small or hurt them just to feel big ourselves.

4 infringement as 'post-traumatic play' due to sexual violence

I know there are kids who get touched weirdly by adults or older youths on the penis or butt or labia or the vagina. Or maybe someone showed them confusing sexual videos. And sometimes kids who experience that do something to other kids. Sometimes they do that again and again and can't stop. Then they urgently need help. They are allowed to and even should talk about what happened to them with an adult they trust. Even if they themselves were mean to another child.

I don't know if the situation was like any of these "It may be" examples I just mentioned. What do you think about the situation?

Clarity and Exceptions

When sexual infringements happen among kids it is up to us adults to provide clarity and make new trust possible. For this purpose it can make sense to create new rules e.g. kids shouldn't be naked for a while, not get undressed. Or maybe the cosy corner gets closed off for a while. Or the infringing child is no longer allowed to be alone with the afflicted child. When you make these new rules, make sure they're only for a limited time e.g. two weeks, and inform the kids about this. Give reasons for the new rules:

Recently it didn't work out that everyone took good care with each other. It's important that everyone feels comfortable when you play together. That's why we came up with these rules for the near future, until you can all take good care with each other again.

General prevention

Some general sentences about prevention that have helped many kindergartens, schools and homes.

No one is allowed to hurt others. And when you play no one is allowed to put fingers, or objects into body openings. Neither into the mouth, nose, ears, nor the butthole or the vagina, because you could get hurt. It's important to all take good care with each other and themselves.

Grown ups can change diapers and wash babies and help kids wash themselves, but no adult is allowed to play with the vulva or penis or anus (butthole) of a child. Or to have a child touch the adult or "wash" them between the legs. That's forbidden.

Consent

Even with young kids it's possible to practise consent and to talk about voluntariness:

When you play games with touching it's important that every kid who is involved feels Yes-feelings. No matter if it's about tickling, wrestling, cuddling, kissing, huffing or touching sex organs. You can't always know if the other child wants a specific touch. That's why it's always important to ask first.

When a child doesn't want something, you have to stop. Some kids say it very clearly: No, stop, I don't want this. Some don't say it that clearly. Sometimes you want to say no, but the body freezes and doesn't move. That also means Stop.

Sometimes it's not so easy to say no to something. Because maybe you're not sure about it. Or because a touch or a game may be exciting and too much and stressful at the same time. Or maybe because it's hard to say no to a good friend, because you don't want them to find a different friend instead. Saying no takes practise and courage. Even when a child doesn't manage to say Stop or No, it's not the child's fault.

How do you show that you don't like a touch? How do you show when you like something?

The stop light system

Some touches give us nice feelings in our bodies and our inner stop light turns green. Some touches give us bad feelings in our bodies, an 'I don't want that feeling': Red. Then it's clear we don't want something. Some touches make the stop light go Yellow - they are in between, we're not sure if something is pleasant or uncomfortable. Yellow means 'Watch out, it might become Red soon'.

Which touches from which people are red, green or yellow for you?