

INSIGHTS

by Michael Grose - leading parenting educator



Talk to your kids about difficult real-life issues

Some conversations are hard to have with kids, but a measure of effective parenting is how we talk about real-life issues

Sometimes news items occur that require sensitive handling by parents. The recent stabbing and subsequent death of a twelve year old student at a Queensland secondary school, is one such incident that requires a considered parental approach.

Most people I've spoken with are dumb-founded that such a shocking thing could happen in an Australian school. But the fact that a boy so young could be killed by a knife in the supposed safe haven of the schoolyard, suggests that something is sadly amiss in our community.

This incident raises questions about how we handle conflict in our community. While physical conflict and young males have always been close bed fellows, the use of weapons in a dispute is a dangerous and disproportionate response.

According to law enforcement agencies the number of assaults involving weapons including knives, bottles and other objects, has escalated over the last decade so the nature of violence is changing and more dangerous than in the past.

So as a parent how do you respond to such an event?

Don't dodge talking about it. Using common sense and taking kids' ages into account this incident should be talked about over the kitchen table. Get a feel for what your kids know about it, and then determine how they feel and what they think. I suspect in some cases, this could open up a can of worms concerning how children treat each other at school and how disputes are solved in the playground, away from adult supervision. Such windows into the world of young people are rare and to be valued, so don't shy away from difficult conversations.

On a broader scale, it would be useful to reinforce with kids how we as human beings in a civilised society resolve our disputes and also how we handle our emotions. Young people live in a time of extremes where everything is either awful or awesome. There are few shades of grey in their lives these days.

They're also growing up in a time when technology enables instant communication, which anyone who's sent an email off in anger would know, that this is not necessarily a good thing.

They would benefit from slowing down their responses, giving them time to work through anger, fear or disappointment, rather than go off half-cocked and say and do something they regret later.

It would be useful to talk with kids about compromise, turning the other cheek and how, at times, the really brave thing to do is to move away when school yard disputes are imminent. Talking about right and wrongs is one approach. But talking with kids about appropriate ways to solve relationship problems, handling their emotional highs and lows and staying safe when you are not around, are useful conversations to engage in. Admittedly, these types of conversations can be tough to have with kids who don't want to talk or open up. But no one ever said effective parenting is easy, just important!

Here are some ideas to help:

1. **Choose** an appropriate time and place to talk about difficult issues with your kids, including when you are driving a car.
2. **Check** first with what they know about an incident, then how they feel and what they think about it.
3. **Point** out to kids when they've resolved sibling relationship difficulties amicably or managed their emotions well.
4. **Build** a vocabulary around good conflict resolution and emotional management. E.g. 'talk it through', 'what do you think your brother wants?' and 'take your time to calm down.'

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