



Tough Conversations in the Home: A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

Parenting pre-teens and teens is a full contact sport. Life comes at you fast. This is especially true for the parent/child relationship during these years. With the emergence and rapid growth of digital media, teens and pre-teens have incredible access to an almost incalculable reservoir of content. At times, keeping up on all the shifting sands of cultural influence seems hopeless. Yet, God's charge to train up our children in the way they should go (see Proverbs 22:6) has not changed. The need for children to be well taught has certainly not lessened. Perhaps, however, for some, a new strategy is needed.

Rather than attempting to become an expert on the general trends of the culture around us, as parents our role is to become experts merely in the cultural impact in our own homes. To do this, we need to develop top notch listening skills and strategies that will allow us to successfully engage productively in the many tough conversations that are likely to surface in our homes.

by Dr. David Rueter

Inside you may be falling apart. The bomb you feared may have just been dropped, but outside you are maintaining your calm. When difficult subjects are surfaced by the young people in our lives, they may start the conversation with great fear about your reaction.

Here are a few things to keep in mind to help you navigate tough conversations in your home:

Tough conversations are good to have.

Difficult and emotionally trying as they may be, actually having tough conversations with your teen or pre-teen is far better than not. Better that they come to you and you struggle through the conversation, than they believe that they cannot ask.

Create an environment in which asking tough questions is accepted.

In order for tough conversations to happen in the home, teens need to feel comfortable broaching the difficult subjects that they wrestle with. They need to know that their parents will listen to them and not just react.

Practice being a non-anxious presence.

Inside you may be falling apart. The bomb you feared may have just been dropped, but outside you are maintaining your calm. When difficult subjects are surfaced by the young people in our lives, they may start the conversation with great fear about your reaction. Keeping your own fears in check and not reacting or immediately condemning allows space for a full conversation to take place. If you are able to keep the conversation going, you will have time to share your fears and concerns in due time.

Don't try and make it go away.

Even if you do not want to hear it, if the issue is a matter of importance, you cannot will it away. You may be tempted to wait it out in the hopes that the struggle will pass like some sort of phase. That may well happen. Some struggles do turn out to be short lived; however, in the moment respect the seriousness with which the issue is presented. You may find that by listening you may well help your son or daughter to move on sooner than might otherwise have been likely.

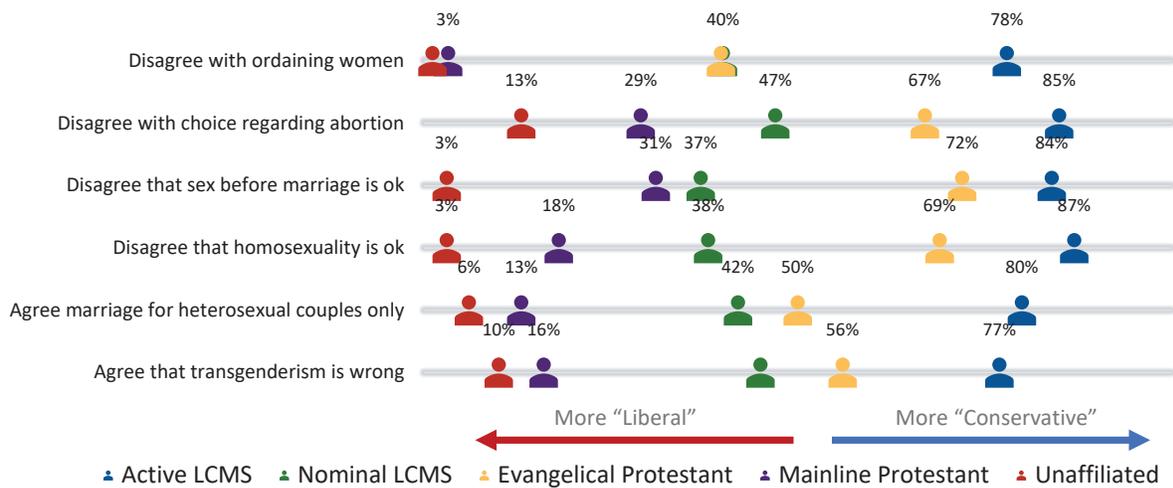
Listen deeply and ask clarifying questions.

It may take some time to really understand what the core of the issue is that your son or daughter is bringing to you. Before you jump to a conclusion make sure that you have taken the time to assess whether you are truly hearing and understanding what is being said. Use classic counseling phrases like “What I hear you saying” or “Tell me if I am understanding this correctly” to help you make sure that you understand as well as to communicate you are not jumping to any conclusions.

Take the time you both need.

There is no rule that you must have an answer immediately. Unless someone is in immediate danger, it is completely fair to ask for time to think through, pray through, and study the Scriptures and other materials before offering an answer. Communicate that this is your way of taking their struggle seriously. Ask that no decisions be made while you do this and set a specific time frame for the next conversation, allowing you adequate time, but not so much that you appear to be stalling.





Be transparent.

As they grow into Christian adulthood, your children will need to be able to think through difficult subjects on their own and watch how you address subjects that challenge your faith and thinking. Being transparent means learning to reveal more and more of the behind the scenes thought processes that go into your own thinking. Keeping in mind the level of their own maturity, make sure you are appropriately open and honest.

Remain faithful.

In the midst of a tough conversation, regardless of the subject matter, it is essential as a Christian parent to remain faithful—faithful to your Christian faith and faithful to your calling to love and train up your child. There should be no doubt on the part of the teens and/or pre-teens in your house that you love them and love the Lord and that the two are never mutually exclusive. ■

Discussion Questions

- What is your congregation doing to equip parents with communication skills and the information they need to have tough conversation with their sons and daughters?
- How is your congregation helping parents take resources like the Small Catechism, worship experiences, and congregational Christian education into the home?
- What are the topics that your congregation should be helping parents to address? Who should be responsible for identifying, obtaining, and sharing this information?
- What are we doing to equip parents to confront their sons and daughters in love and to work through conflict in an appropriate way?
- What are the topics that have been considered taboo in the past, but should be addressed by church leadership and parents in the home?

I didn't feel safe asking questions and having doubts about my faith/the denomination. I felt like when I brought up issues, I was answered with condescension. ...I felt like there was a fear whenever I brought up other ideas. Since no LCMS friends wanted to talk about the things that mattered to me, I slowly found new friends to talk with and connect with.

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