



Cheat Sheet

TIPS FOR DISCUSSING SENSITIVE TOPICS

Action	Example
Notice your physical and emotional signs of discomfort.	Adults may recognize discomfort through tension, defensiveness, nervous laughter, avoidance, irritability, or wanting to quickly “fix” the conversation. Simply identifying these reactions can help prevent them from driving the interaction.
Pause before reacting.	If a young person shares something surprising or upsetting, taking a brief breath or moment before responding can help adults avoid reacting impulsively with criticism, panic, or judgment.
Reflect on personal beliefs and experiences.	Sometimes discomfort comes from an adult’s own history, family messages, or unresolved experiences. Asking questions like “Why does this topic feel difficult for me?” or “What messages did I grow up hearing about this?” can increase self-awareness.
Accept that discomfort is normal.	Sensitive conversations are often uncomfortable for everyone involved. Adults do not need to feel perfectly confident or calm to still have a caring and productive conversation. It’s okay to say: “This can feel awkward to talk about,” or “I didn’t always have adults to discuss this with growing up.”
Focus on the young person’s needs rather than performance.	Many adults worry about saying the perfect thing. Shifting the goal from “I need to handle this perfectly” to “I want to be supportive and available” can reduce pressure.
Be willing to say “I don’t know.”	Adults do not need to be experts on every topic. Modeling curiosity and willingness to learn together can strengthen trust.
Give yourself permission to continue the conversation later.	Adults can say: “I want to think carefully about this and come back to it,” or “I’m glad you brought this up.” This can prevent shutting the conversation down while allowing time to regulate emotions.
Seek support from other adults when needed.	Parents, teachers, mentors, or clinicians may benefit from consultation, psychoeducation, supervision, or peer support— especially when topics involve mental health, trauma, sexuality, identity, or safety concerns.
Don’t make it a one-time conversation.	Sensitive topics are usually ongoing conversations that evolve over time. Brief, repeated check-ins are often more effective than one big talk.