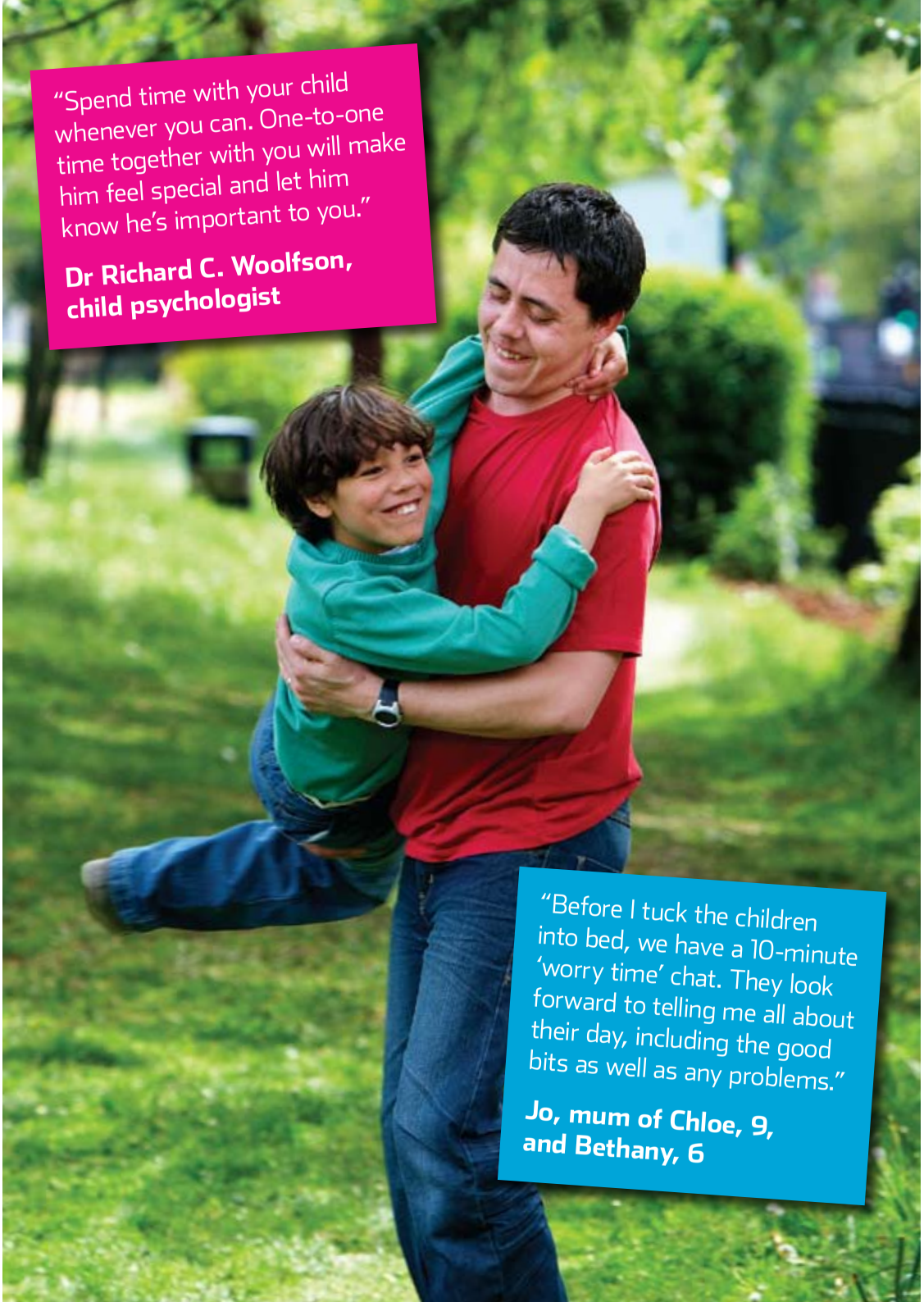
Listening to children

Improving communication with your child

NSPCC™
Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP.



"Spend time with your child whenever you can. One-to-one time together with you will make him feel special and let him know he's important to you."

Dr Richard C. Woolfson, child psychologist

"Before I tuck the children into bed, we have a 10-minute 'worry time' chat. They look forward to telling me all about their day, including the good bits as well as any problems."

Jo, mum of Chloe, 9, and Bethany, 6

Children can't always put their feelings into words, so listening to them includes paying attention to their actions and behaviour.

Listening is about two-way communication between you and your child, with each of you valuing and respecting the views of the other.

Children who are listened to are usually well adjusted and self-confident, while those whose needs are ignored may be withdrawn or difficult and suffer from low self-esteem.

Parents who cannot communicate well with their children are more likely to resort to smacking and hitting in moments of frustration. Communicating with your child is also vital in preventing child abuse, including providing your child with information on keeping safe, and being there to offer help and protection.

We've collected the best advice from professionals, as well as some top tips from parents, to help you communicate with your child, whatever their age.

To make for easier reading, this booklet refers to children as he or him, and she or her in alternating sections. All the information applies equally to boys and girls.

For more advice...
...on listening to your child, visit www.yourfamily.org.uk

Listening to your baby

You can start listening to your baby from the very beginning. Smiling, stroking, cuddling, talking to your baby and making eye contact are all ways of communicating.

From the very first day after birth, your baby will be listening to you and in a few weeks you will be rewarded by smiles and those first cooing sounds – your baby is talking to you.

Of course, crying is a very important part of your baby's language too. If your baby still cries after you have done all the obvious checks – for hunger and thirst, wind, changing nappies, not being too hot or too cold, or even just bored with their own company – you might begin to feel desperate.

"I've read to my baby since he was a few months old. He loves listening to me doing different voices, actions and songs, and he tries to turn the pages! My six-year-old is brilliant at reading but still loves us to read to him."

Sonia, mum of Louis, 6, and Frankie, 13 months

Remember

- Crying is perfectly normal behaviour for a new baby. In the first few months of life, a baby spends on average at least two hours in every 24-hour period crying.
- Crying is meant to be a sound that parents find difficult to ignore. This is nature's way of ensuring that your baby's needs are met.
- Crying is neither your fault nor your baby's, and things will get better later on.

Find out more

Cry-sis
Provides support and advice regarding excessively crying or sleepless babies.
www.cry-sis.org.uk
08451 228 669

Tips to help you cope with crying

- Rock your baby in a pram or cradle or try going on a car ride, as these can often work like magic.
- Walk up and down with him or try carrying him close to you in a sling.
- Sing or talk gently to him, or try playing a tape of womb sounds or gentle music as this can sometimes help very young babies.
- Some babies find the sound of white noise, such as a vacuum cleaner or washing machine, soothing.
- Try swaddling – wrapping your baby very firmly inside a light shawl. This gives some babies the secure feeling of being back in the womb.
- Don't be too quick to put your baby back in his cot if he begins to calm down.
- If your baby is very keen on sucking and you're sure he's not hungry or thirsty, you may want to try a dummy, but make sure it's clean, and never dip it into anything sweet.
- Cuddling your baby is usually the best tip of all. If you can relax and don't feel too tense, you are the best comfort your baby can have.

Did you know?

Your baby can recognise you and your partner's voice soon after birth. This is because, while in the womb, your baby will have heard you talking and so your voices will be familiar as soon as she is born.

If you run out of patience, remember that being angry with your baby will only make the crying worse. You don't need to be ashamed of your feelings – most parents feel angry with their children at some time. Go off and cool down, or take your anger out on the cushions or have a good cry yourself. Go back and deal with your baby once you feel calm again.
If your baby cries persistently, ask your health visitor for advice or ring a helpline like Cry-sis.

Give children choices to help them feel listened to: "Do you want to wear the blue or pink socks today?"

Listening as your child grows up

Children learn to talk by listening to adults speaking directly to them. By the time your child is three or four and has mastered quite a lot of language, she will want to practise it as much as possible, and will use it to learn about the rest of her world. This may mean endless chattering and "why?" questions. Try to listen and answer as patiently as you can.

- **Fit listening easily into your daily routine**
  Talk about the things you see when you are on the bus, walking to the shops, at the supermarket or during bath time. You could sing or recite a nursery rhyme to your baby when changing her nappy, or read a book together.
- **Give plenty of encouragement**
  When your child is learning to talk, they will probably use funny words of their own and are bound to get some words mixed up. "I shower Rafi with praise whenever he gets words right. It is a great confidence-booster and praise works better than criticism!" **Shobha, mum of Rafi, 3**
- **Try to answer all of your child's questions**
  As your child listens to you and looks to you, they build up a picture of themselves. "I used to tell my son 'not now' or 'go away' when I was too tired to answer his questions, then I realised that I wasn't helping him to learn. Reminding myself of this now makes it easier to cope and my son remembers all of my answers!" **Nicola, mum of Kieron, 8**
- **Look out for warning signs**
  If your child seems unhappy or reluctant to talk, it might be a sign that something is wrong. It might be that she feels you are not interested in what she is saying, or wants to tell you something that she finds difficult to explain. Ensure that you make opportunities for conversation, preferably when your child is not overtired from a long day at school.
- **Spend some time reading with your child**
  This helps improve both her listening and her language skills, and will give you both a starting point to talk about your child's thoughts and feelings.
- **Set aside some special listening time**
  "If you're busy or too tired, it can be hard to make time to listen to your child. You might find it easier to set aside a special part of the day, such as just before your child goes to bed. You need to be flexible though. Sometimes small children just can't wait to talk about something that is important to them."
  Eileen Hayes, NSPCC parenting advisor

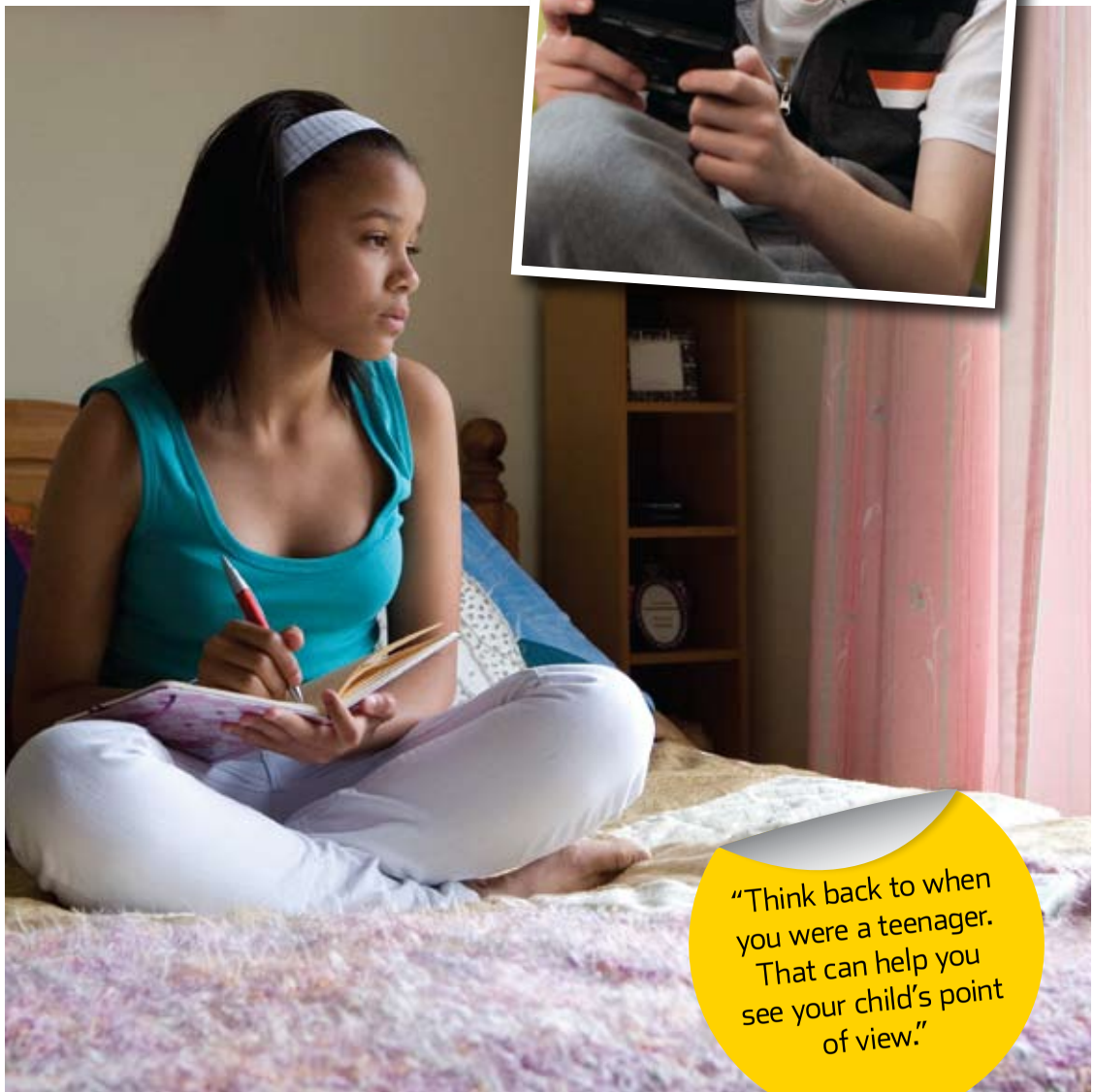
Visit your local library
Reading out aloud is great for your relationship with your child. Why not try visiting your local library and choosing some books that you and your child can read together?

Listening to older children

Most of the tips about listening to younger children apply to older children too, but older children also have their own different needs.

Being a parent to teenagers can be a challenging, worrying and sometimes distressing time. While your teenager is pushing for independence, you can feel rejected, criticised and confused. Here are some tips to help you through.

- **Make it clear that you want to be involved**
  If you find that your child never wants to talk to you about anything, you may need to work really hard at it. A good start is to make it clear that you are interested in them and in what they do.
- **Respect your child's views**
  Don't expect him to like everything you like or agree with everything you say. The teenage years are a time of testing out opinions and people, including parents. Your teenage child is more likely to respect your views if you respect his views too.
- **Let your child know you're there for them**
  Older children need to learn how to live without the constant support of their parents, but they still need you. However independent your children seem, let them know that you'll always be there to offer comfort and support.
- **Remember what it's like to be a teenager**
  The teen years can be a trying time, both for parents and for children. Teenagers may behave like an adult one minute and like a toddler the next.
- **Respect your child's privacy**
  Older children particularly need privacy. They need their own space, time to themselves, and the right not to communicate about certain areas of their lives, for example their personal relationships. If you respect their privacy, they are more likely to confide in you.
- **Don't impose your ideas**
  It is fine to state that you have different views, and your teenager still needs you to be clear about acceptable limits to their behaviour. However, imposing all your attitudes, or trying to force him to agree with your point of view, will only make things worse.
- **Get help if you need it**
  If you are worried that your child has a particular problem – for example problems at school or with friends, such as bullying, relationships, being the victim of racist attitudes, or a problem with drugs or alcohol – you may need to get professional advice. Some of the organisations listed in the section on special difficulties in this booklet might be able to help.



"Think back to when you were a teenager. That can help you see your child's point of view."

Parents talk about listening

Top NSPCC parenting advisor Eileen Hayes responds with advice for three parents talking about communicating with their children.

Even when parents are ready to talk and listen to their children, there can still be problems. It's not always easy to understand what children are trying to tell us.

Interruptions

"My daughter always interrupts when I'm talking to her dad. What can I do?" **Liz, mum of Rebecca, 5**

Eileen "Her interruptions may be a way of trying to get your attention. However, if you do make a time to listen to her, explain that you also need time to discuss things together as parents. Young children often demand immediate attention and will interrupt. As they grow older they will realise that they can remember to say things later and will interrupt less often."

Whining

"I don't feel I have any choice about listening. My son whines all the time. I just want to switch off." **Dai, dad of Owen, 7**

Eileen "Perhaps you need to make time to sit quietly with him and respond carefully to what he is saying. Once he realises there are special times when he has all your positive attention, perhaps he won't need to whine. Try to avoid getting into the habit of only responding when he whines loudly. This negative attention will only make things worse."

Pressure to deliver

"I try to listen to my son's needs, but I can't always be expected to meet them." **Raymond, dad of Adam, 3**

Eileen "Listening is not the same as always giving in. For example, if your toddler is always asking for sweets, which you say he can't have, you can still let him know you've listened by saying something like 'I know you're cross that you can't have any sweets'."

Find out more

Parents Advice Centre
(Northern Ireland)
www.parentsadvicecentre.org
0808 8010 722

Parentline Plus
www.parentlineplus.org.uk
0808 800 2222
(including ParentLine Scotland)

Gotateenager
www.gotateenager.org.uk
(Provided by Parentline Plus)

ParentsCentre online
www.parentscentre.gov.uk

Your Family
Positive parenting tips
brought to you by the NSPCC
www.yourfamily.org.uk

Some talking and listening tips

Remember
It's important to listen to yourself and how you are feeling. Watch out for early warning signs of stress, such as headaches or tiredness, and take steps to improve things if you need to.

Once you've got into the habit of making time to talk and listen to your children, you might find these tips useful.

- **Give your full attention**
  If your child wants to tell you something, try to stop what you're doing so that you can listen carefully. If that's not practical, explain that you need to finish what you're doing, and then you'll be able to listen properly.
- **Let them speak first**
  Look directly at your child while she is talking. For small children this means getting down to their level. Don't rush to respond. Otherwise you won't really hear what is being said.
- **Practise reflective listening with small children**
  This means checking that you have understood what your child has said, by using phrases like "So do you mean that…?" in order to clarify things.
- **Let your child know that you understand how he feels**
  Sometimes it helps to say something like "I know you're feeling sad," or "You must be feeling very angry to say something like that." Never dismiss your child's feelings.
- **Involve your children in family discussions**
  Depending on their age, allow your children opportunities to have a say, such as on changes to routines and where to go for holidays.
- **Respect your child**
  Remember that your child's idea of what is important may be very different from yours. Try to remember this when they want to tell you something urgently, even if you are busy.

- **Don't be too critical**
  Try not to put your child off talking to you, for example by saying things like "That was stupid," "Why can't you be more sensible," or "Grow up." Hurtful words can damage self-esteem. Try to make positive remarks instead.
- **Don't shout or nag**
  Children soon learn to ignore nagging. Only shout if you need to warn your child urgently. Then it will have the right effect.
- **Reassure your child's worries**
  If your children seem worried or upset by your problems, such as money or relationship difficulties, it is best to talk about this but explain that it isn't their fault. Don't expect them to offer you emotional support.
- **Don't brush problems aside**
  If you encourage your children to talk, you are bound to hear things that might disappoint or upset you. Don't brush problems aside. Find ways of coping with them, and get help if necessary.

If you have more than one child, it can be especially hard to give your children the listening time they need. Try to work out a way of giving each child some special time. But remember to set aside some time for yourself too.

"The hardest thing is giving each child enough attention. After school each boy is eager to talk about their day and I make a conscious effort to listen to everybody. They get quality time from each other too, making camps, creating imaginary worlds… Occasionally someone says, 'Four children – are you mad?', but a big family is so much fun. Their social skills are great and there's always someone to play with."
James, dad of Jack, 10, Scott, 8, Will, 5, and Henry, 2.

Some special difficulties

There can be many reasons why parents and children find it hard to communicate. These pages give some examples of difficult areas and suggestions for dealing with them, along with details of other organisations that may be able to help.

Children with serious illness or disability

If your child has a serious illness or a disability, communication may be more difficult. You may need to consider other ways of communicating with her and enabling her to communicate with others, such as through learning sign language if she is deaf or hard-of-hearing.

Contact a Family
Provides advice and support to parents of disabled children.

www.cafamily.org.uk
0808 808 3555

Capability Scotland
Provides ASCS (Advice Service Capability Scotland), a national disability advice and information service.

www.capability-scotland.org.uk
0131 313 5510
Textphone 0131 346 2529

Relationship difficulties

If you have serious problems in your relationship with your partner, your children may well suffer, and you probably won't have the time or energy to listen to them. If you become separated or divorced, reassure your child that it is not her fault that your relationship with your partner failed, and that you both love her as much as ever.

One Parent Families/Gingerbread
www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk
0800 018 5026

Relate
A confidential counselling service for relationship problems of any kind.

www.relate.org.uk
0300 100 1234

Relationships Scotland
Relationship counselling, mediation and family support across Scotland.

www.relationships-scotland.org.uk
0845 119 2020

Death

If someone you and your child love has died, let him talk about it and be sad. Don't hide the fact that you are grieving too. This will help him to learn that it's OK to cry and feel sad when someone close to you dies, but that sooner or later, life goes on. You may need to prepare yourself to answer questions about the nature of death.

Cruse Bereavement Care
www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk
0844 477 9400

Young person's helpline
0808 808 1677

Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland
www.crusescotland.org.uk
01738 444178

Teasing and bullying

Let your child know that you understand how she feels. Talk about what happens, and together try to find ways of coping. Help her to learn how to show bullies that she won't put up with it. If the problem occurs at school and is serious, you must involve a teacher. Never ignore bullying or hope it will just go away.

Kidscape
Provides information on bullying and keeping children safe.

www.kidscape.org.uk
020 7730 3300

YoungMinds
Promotes the mental health of children and young people.

www.youngminds.org.uk
0800 018 2138

Racism

If your children tell you that other children or adults are being racist to them, explain that racism is totally unfair, and is based on ignorance and insecurity. If the problem persists and occurs at school, you will need to involve a teacher.

If your child expresses racist views, you should explain why such attitudes are unacceptable, and why there are differences between people. Remember that children will copy you, so be careful not to show them unfair prejudices.

Equality and Human Rights Commission
www.equalityhumanrights.com
Helpline for England: **0845 604 6610**
Helpline for Wales: **0845 604 8810**
Helpline for Scotland: **0845 604 5510**

Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission
www.nihrc.org • 028 9024 3987

Alcohol and drugs

If you suspect your teenager is drinking heavily, think why it may be happening, and encourage them to think about it too.

If your child has been experimenting with drugs, let her know that you are confident that she can stop, and that you will offer her any support you can.

Drinkline Scotland
A 24-hour helpline providing support and advice on any alcohol concerns.
0800 7314 314

FRANK
Provides advice to anyone affected by drugs.
www.talktofrank.com
0800 776600

Sexism

Don't stereotype your child by expecting boys and girls to behave in certain ways and enjoy certain things. Encourage them to do what they want, regardless of what others think, and make sure they know that their choice of subjects, jobs and hobbies does not depend on their sex.

Talking about difficult subjects

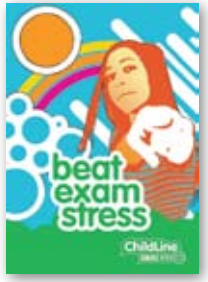
Some parents find it difficult to discuss certain topics, such as sex. It is important to give your child clear, honest answers to his questions. Obviously, the answers will depend on the age of your child and your own values and beliefs. Keep answers simple for very young children.

Additional resources

Use these handy resources with your child:

In the know
Aimed at children aged eight to 11, this booklet helps children to understand the problems faced by those who are abused and advises them how to keep safe.
Download from www.nspcc.org.uk/publications

Worried? Need to talk?
Aimed at young people aged 11 to 18, this booklet provides information about ChildLine and other services that are there to help. **Download from www.nspcc.org.uk/publications**



Beat exam stress
This booklet for children and young people provides guidance on coping with exams and the stress they can cause, plus tips on how to get support. **Download from www.nspcc.org.uk/publications**

Feel safe at home
Aimed at children aged seven to 12, this booklet uses straightforward language to explain what domestic violence is, how it can make children feel, and how and where they can get help.
Download from www.nspcc.org.uk/publications

SAFE: personal safety skills for deaf children
Designed for group work use, this DVD-Rom helps give deaf children and young people the knowledge, awareness and language they need to stay safe and make better informed life choices. **For further information and to purchase, visit www.nspcc.org.uk/safe**

Children and young people talk about listening

(I'd like)"...not to be interrupted or my parents to just assume what I'm talking about and butt in. Or for them to say they know what I'm going through and come up with a solution – sometimes I just want to get it out, not solve it like I'm a problem." **Ale, 16**

"I like it when my mum comes into my classroom at school to look at my work and talk to my teachers. She knows who my friends are and I tell her what I've done each day." **Scarlett, 6**

"I tell my parents when something's up with me, to get it out of my system and because hopefully whatever it is they'll understand. I don't need a solution, or for someone else to figure out what's bothering me, just a passive listener." **Maaike, 16**

"I like my mum and dad to say they're listening, and then actually listen to me and not start doing something else, or start talking to someone else because when they do that, it makes you feel invisible." **Joss, 13**

NSPCC Helpline

Don't talk yourself out of it. Talk to us.

The NSPCC Helpline

If you're finding it hard to cope as a parent and want to talk, or you're worried about a child who is at risk of abuse or in need of help, the NSPCC Helpline is here to help 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Call **0808 800 5000** to speak to a helpline advisor. For help by email **help@nspcc.org.uk**

If you are hard of hearing, you can contact us Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm by:

- textphone **0808 056 0566**
- British Sign Language interpreters on videophone **020 8463 1148**
- British Sign Language interpreters on IP videophone or webcam – **nspcc.signvideo.tv**

More advice from the NSPCC and Your family

Our parenting pack

If you've found this leaflet useful, you might like to try some of the other titles in our parenting pack. They include plenty of advice on practical, positive parenting, and cover subjects like managing stress, encouraging better behaviour and keeping your child safe when they're either at home or out alone.

To request a pack, please send an A4 SAE (with £2 in stamps), mentioning the parenting pack, to the address below or download copies from **www.nspcc.org.uk/parenting**

NSPCC
Weston House, 42 Curtain Road,
London EC2A 3NH
www.nspcc.org.uk
020 7825 2500
info@nspcc.org.uk

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