Factsheet 3: What words should I use when having conversations about problematic and harmful sexual behaviour?

ACWA Association of Children's Welfare Agencies
CCWT Centre for Community Welfare Training

Parenting Research Centre

You can find conversation tips below (and in Factsheets 4, 5 and 6) to help you talk with children and young people about problematic and harmful sexual behaviour. Each tip has examples of what you could say or ask.

Conversation tip	Example
When talking about problematic and harmful sexual behaviour (as well as sex, sexuality and healthy relationships), try to:[1] • Use words that fit the age or level of development of the child or young person. This helps their understanding. Make sure the words you choose don't minimise the behaviour. • Use correct names for body parts (e.g., penis, vagina) to reduce any confusion. • Use words and concepts also being used at school or by services/professionals. Everyone using the same language can reduce potential confusion for the child or young person. You might like to talk together to find a word or name that you both (and others) can use for the problematic and harmful sexual behaviour. This can help your family talk about the behaviour together and with others (e.g., professionals).[2]	Examples of words you might use to refer to the problematic or harmful sexual behaviour include:[3] • *harmful/hurtful behaviour* • *harmful/hurtful decision* • *inappropriate behaviour* To come up with a shared word for the behaviour, you might try starting the conversation by using open questions like: *To help us talk together, let's come up with a word or name we can use when we are speaking about [name behaviour]. Is there a word that you would like us to use?* *There are some people who need to know about [name behaviour] so they can help you make good decisions and keep you and [child/young person impacted by behaviour] safe. What word should we use with them to talk about it?*
	For young children, words you might use to quickly refer to the behaviour include: • *the touching problem* • *against the rules*
It is important not to use words often used for adults. Doing so can negatively impact on the wellbeing of the child or young person who showed the behaviour (such as by triggering feelings of shame, confusion or that they are being judged or 'labelled'). These feelings might even lead them to withdraw or 'shut down,' preventing conversations and opportunities to learn more positive behaviours.[4]	When referring to the child or young person, **avoid** words like ***perpetrator***, ***offender***, ***sex offender***, ***abuser*** or ***predator***.[5] Instead, **use** words that focus on the behaviour itself (see next Conversation Tip). You could also just use the child's or young person's name.
	When referring to a child or young person that experienced the behaviour, **avoid** words like ***victim*** or ***survivor***.[6] Instead, **use** their name.

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Conversation tip	Example
Be clear it's the behaviour that is concerning you and that is inappropriate (not the child or young person themselves). This can be done by clearly separating out the behaviour from the child or young person.[7]	*Some kids/teenagers might feel worried that they are a 'bad person' because they [insert behaviour]. You are not a 'bad person'—and I don't think you are. But [name behaviour] was inappropriate and a harmful decision. I want us to work together to help you make better decisions.[8]* **Avoid** words that judge the child or young person themselves or that trigger strong emotions, such as ***bad***, ***nasty*** or ***disgusting***. **Avoid** saying ***you are*** followed by a negative statement about the child or young person. For example: ***You are being naughty and rude***. Instead, **use** statements that focus on the behaviour itself. For example: ***That behaviour is inappropriate*** or [***Insert behaviour***] ***is harmful/hurtful***.
	For young children, you might say something like: *You aren't a bad/naughty kid, but [insert behaviour] is not ok/is against the rules.* **Avoid** words that label or judge the child themselves, such as naughty, rude or misbehaving.

1 Government of South Australia, Department for Child Protection (2020)

2 NSW Government, Family & Community Services (2016)

3 NSW Government, Family & Community Services (2016)

4 ANROWS (2020); Hackett (2019) NSW Government (unpublished)

5 Government of South Australia, Department for Child Protection (2020); NSW Government (unpublished)

6 Government of South Australia, Department for Child Protection (2020); Mitchell, Tucci, Fernandes and Howell (2020)

7 ANROWS (2020)

8 ANROWS (2020); Hackett (2019) NSW Government (unpublished)

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