

# How do you talk to kids about abortion?

Talking to kids about social evils is never easy, especially when it comes to younger children. As a parent, you want to shield your children from the reality that people do bad things—really bad things—to one another. You want them to remain innocent for as long as possible.

You want them to feel safe.

Unfortunately, these days, kids encounter these realities—and start asking questions about them—long before we parents are ready for them.

Here are some ideas from our readers along with a few basic guidelines for talking about this issue with kids.

## Discussion and prayer

I introduced it to my older three kids. At the time they were 10, 8 and 7. I didn't have any books (though that would have been a good way to go), but I teach everything through discussion. I explained what it was, kept graphic stuff out. I only said that babies are killed through the womb through a certain procedure. That was enough for them; they didn't need to know how it was done, they only wanted to know WHY. From there, we talked about why some women choose to have an abortion from being misled or in desperate situations. We focused on compassion for these women; and as our "problem solver," we pray the Divine Mercy on Sundays at 3 for women who have appts the next day to have an abortion.

— *Becky Arganbright*

## "That's why we volunteer at Birthright"

When the subject came up (we do the Life Chain every year, so

they were aware of its existence at a young age), we explained that “some people do not live the way God wants us to, so things happen like young women have a baby in their tummy when they are too young or otherwise unable to care for a baby. Because they don’t understand how to live the way God wants us to, they think the way to take care of the problem is to kill the baby. That’s why we go to the Life Chain and why we volunteer at Birthright...to pray for the people who do this to understand and do what’s right, and to try to help them do what’s right.”

When our oldest was preparing for her First Reconciliation, she was ready for an in-depth discussion on sin and forgiveness, so we explained our own experience with abortion and with forgiveness. The others were not ready at that point, but the subject came up later, so when my son said, “But you and Daddy didn’t do something like that, right?” I said a prayer for help and told him the truth. We left out the graphic stuff about what abortion is, but they do understand that the baby dies, and they understand that many women are feeling desperate when they make the decision. We didn’t use any materials, it was just conversation and a whole lot of prayer.

– *Laura*

## **An upsetting truth**

We find that through First Sacraments prep (for a variety of reasons) if not before, the question is always asked of us as parents. Our oldest was in Catholic school and only about 6 and 1/2 but we had already talked about the killing on Sept. 11<sup>th</sup>, so we explained that this was another type of killing of innocent people, but before the person is even born. Our family has been so desperately poor that we’ve already dealt with “who do we feed how much today” at times, and we also know people combating human trafficking so there was understanding of the “forces” we face but it was still quite

upsetting, especially to our daughter.

– *Nicolle*

## **Plain, simple answers**

This issue has come up on multiple occasions: billboards, seeing protests outside on Hwy 100, Life Chain, sermons at Mass, why Mommy and Daddy go to the pro-life dinner (isn't everyone pro-life?), watching the political debates. Then one day my 7-year-old was looking at Pinterest and saw the mutilated baby image on my wall. □ I'm sure there were many more times! Plain simple answers, right? But how to explain that to children—you can never erase that image from their minds. □

–*Kelly Futterer*

## **Horrificed and freaked out**

It came up at breakfast when my eldest (then 8?) asked what one was (we were listening to the news for a moment). I thought about it briefly and thought it deserved a direct answer and said, “it's when the woman who is pregnant ends the baby's life before it is born, through drugs or surgery.” This was a mistake. It was OK for Ben, who was disturbed but got the answer to the question, sailed over Julia's head (she was 3), but poor Maria, who was 6. She was horrified, freaked out, and began crying—very unlike her. She continued to be this way around the topic for a couple of years. I mean, I don't fault her the reaction at all, but I wish I had held off on introducing the definition for another year or two.

This also immediately led to the question, “Why would anyone do this?”, to which I answered, “Look, people get very scared, and when they do, they can make really bad decisions, like this one. Some people think the baby isn't a baby, also. But it is definitely a baby and we need to support women who are scared and in a difficult pregnancy by helping them raise the

baby or consider adoption. Your Dad and I both know people who have done this, many of them really regret it, some don't think it was wrong. It's not unusual but children have a right to be born, and we need to advocate for that and help that happen."

– *Susan Windley-Daoust*

## **"I would want to live"**

My 9-year old son and I just came back from Mass this morning. In the announcements, at the end of Mass, the Respect Life person for our church got up to invite people to an event being held next week, and mentioned a clinic next to a hospital where "they kill babies." Well, my son and I have not really had a discussion about abortion, and he did not really know what that word meant. But he knows what "killing babies" means. He was astonished. "They kill babies in hospitals? They are not supposed kill babies in hospitals. They are supposed to help people." Yes...they are.

He wanted an explanation right away, but we had to at least wait until we got outside the church. I explained that sometimes mommies with babies in their tummies don't want them, or that they feel they cannot take care of them, so they have a doctor take the baby out of their tummy and kill them. He cannot understand this—and neither can I.

I remember my older son and his reaction to this information, "Why would they want to kill a perfectly good baby?" My youngest had a similar reaction, but what he said today was, "I'd want to live." What else is there to say?

– *Marcy Klatt* (first published at **LiveCatholic**)

## **How to talk about abortion with your kids: A few**

## proposals

My own experience with the abortion issue goes back to about eighth grade. I, too, was horrified by what I learned, and immediately set out to try to understand how something like that could be legal...and so vehemently defended. That began a years-long journey in which I got involved in my local and state pro-life group, then a national pro-life youth group, the pro-life group at my giant Big Ten university (we did tables with pictures of fetuses in the student union...yeah, that was loads of fun), traveling to Washington, D.C. for the giant pro-life rally in 1991, organizing a post-abortion support group, volunteering with Birthright, and staffing a shelter for single women and children.

You might say this issue is near and dear to my heart. It was the “gate” that led me to a broader interest in social justice.

I mention all this to provide some context for the proposals I’m going to make below. I use the word *proposals* intentionally, because in the end, you’re going to have to find your own way—with the help of the Holy Spirit, of course. But perhaps these thoughts will be helpful.

### **1. Wait to introduce kids to abortion until age 7-9**

I vividly remember the moment described by Susan (my wife) in the account above. It is always heartbreaking to watch kids react to news of grownups behaving badly (slavery! war! clergy sex abuse!), but it’s especially difficult when the child is too young to process the news.

The Catholic Church has long held age seven to be (more or less) the “age of reason,” and modern developmental psychologists back that instinct up. The fact is, kids younger than age seven may not have the mental and emotional tools necessary to process such traumatic information. For instance, they may not be able to grasp that they are not in any

personal danger of being harmed by abortion.

Also, you may find your young child processing the news about abortion in ways that are socially unacceptable. About a year after Maria first learned about abortion, she was dropped off at home by a friend's parent after a play date. "Your daughter was telling us that Barack Obama kills babies," this woman mentioned, rather pointedly and with some disdain. Oh boy. I explained the circumstances: Mr. Obama was running for his first term, and when Maria had asked about his position on abortion, we told her he supported it. The woman arched an eyebrow. "Mm-hmm," she said.

We also heard back from teachers that Maria was sharing the news about abortion with other kids in her class. This put us in the awkward position of telling her she shouldn't initiate the issue with her peers for a few years—not exactly the kind of prophetic witness we had hoped to encourage. But her classmates at the time were also too young to process it well (she was in a mixed grade classroom), and we were concerned that her comments were going to draw angry reactions in some adults that she could not handle at her young age. (Although we're happy to report that as a young teen, she retains her strong sense of compassion and justice and is very pro-life.)

On the other hand, as much as we want to protect our kids from news of the world's many evils, the reality is that they're going to start hearing about it everywhere. Better that they get the news from their parents than their peers, or another adult with a different spin on things. Things may be different in your community, but our kids began encountering public discussions of abortion at school and noticing discussions in the news around age eight or nine.

## **2. Be age-appropriate**

Kids of any age can be introduced to the beauty of fetal development using picture books and online resources. Haul out

the video or photo of their ultrasound, if you have one. Every Catholic child should know the basics about human development: human life begins at the moment of conception, when the individual begins to grow according to the plan mapped out in his or her unique DNA; the human heart begins beating at about 18 days; the fetus begins responding to touch (and pain) between 6-8 weeks; babies are viable beginning at about 24 weeks.

Kids younger than age 6 who ask, "What is abortion?" can be held off by telling them, "That's a question we'll talk about when you're older." If you do go ahead and talk to younger kids about abortion, take Kelly's advice and keep your answers plain, simple, and as non-graphic as possible.

Let slightly older kids (age 7-9) take the lead; answer their questions as best you can, but avoid graphic or detailed descriptions. As Kelly points out, graphic images of mutilated babies aren't easily forgotten, and are truly the stuff of nightmares.

As kids enter the pre-teen and teen years, be sure to talk to them about what they can (and should) do if they or a friend become pregnant. Be sure they know about local resources, including crisis pregnancy centers. And make sure they know that you will always be someone they can turn to for help, either for themselves or a friend. Teens can also be turned on to various pro-life youth groups, such as [Teens for Life](#) (which runs summer leadership camps) and [Students for Life](#).

No parent wants to educate their kids about abortion. But if parents don't educate their kids about abortion, others will do the job for them—and the message won't be one that upholds universal human rights. Parish catechists and youth ministers are reluctant to tackle the issue, given how fraught it is. The media routinely presumes the pro-abortion position to be both reasonable and just, and routinely ignores or distorts information that does not fit that narrative. The issue is

unlikely to be fairly presented in a classroom setting, either.

### **3. Teach compassion for people who participate in abortion**

It is often said that Catholicism is all about “both/and” rather than “either/or,” and that definitely applies to the abortion issue. The example of Jesus and the longstanding tradition of the Church teaches us that respect and compassion are absolutely essential to the proclamation of the Gospel. At every stage, kids should be taught that Christians ought to seek the good of both the mother and her child.

Older kids and teens should be actively encouraged to consider the situation of women who have abortions, listening to their stories empathetically. [Real Choices: Listening to Women; Looking for Alternatives to Abortion](#) by Frederica Mathewes-Green is an excellent resource for teens and parents. The book is dated, but still relevant; Matthews-Green, a one-time supporter of legalized abortion, interviews women who have had abortions to find out why, and comes away with some profound insights into the problem.

Righteous anger, a commitment to prophetically proclaiming the truth, and compassion for unborn children all too often leads opponents of abortion to emphasize truth-telling over compassionate listening and empathetic relationship building. That’s natural, especially for young people. You can help your kids temper that impulse with mercy by pointing out people you (or they) know and love who have had abortions, or pointing out that the odds are high that someone they know and love has had an abortion, even if that person hasn’t shared that information.

(Remember, you know your kids best so take all this within the context of what is right for your family.)