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BIG Conversations with **Little** **Children**

Addressing Questions,
Worries, and Fears



Praise for **Big Conversations with Little Children**

“As I read *Big Conversations with Little Children*, I kept thinking: ‘Have I been waiting for this book for years—all my professional career?’ There isn’t one topic left uncovered no matter how uncomfortable or challenging. What a courageous author. Lauren Starnes understands that children need us as they try to make sense of our complex world. She thoroughly guides us through each challenging topic with practical suggestions, including reflecting on our own emotional discomfort as we find ways to talk about everything and anything with young children and their families. An important book. It makes me wish I had written it!”

—**Tamar Jacobson, Ph.D.**, early childhood development and education consultant for early childhood programs, organizations, and families, and author of *Everyone Needs Attention: Helping Young Children Thrive*

“Human relationships must have two components to survive: trust and communication. When our kids ask questions, it is imperative to be honest in our answers to preserve and build trust. But how do we communicate our answers both appropriately and effectively? *Big Conversations with Little Children* by Lauren Starnes is instrumental in providing both early educators and parents directions on how to navigate through this process. It’s a game changer when it comes to building relationships! A must-have for everyone who interacts with young children.”

—**Julia Cook**, international best-selling children’s author

“*Big Conversations with Little Children* is one of the most important books for everyone who works with young children to read during these turbulent and uncertain times. Young children are trying to understand the world around them and rely upon the adults in their lives to answer their questions in ways that will help them feel safe and cared for. Lauren’s thoughtful and thorough approach emphasizes the importance of building and maintaining relationships with the child as well as the families you work with.”

—**Barbara Kaiser**, co-author, *Challenging Behavior in Young Children* and *Addressing Challenging Behavior: The Leader’s Role*

“In *Big Conversations with Little Children*, Lauren Starnes offers developmentally appropriate strategies to early childhood educators on how to address fears and worries surrounding children in their ecological systems, from the microsystem (e.g., incarceration) to the chronosystem (e.g., social upheaval). A timely book that invites educators not only to affirm children’s feelings but also to empower them to understand issues they care/worry about in an age-appropriate way. Dr. Starnes prepares educators to build knowledge and skills to handle the unexpected, inspires educators to scaffold children’s emotionality and agency development, and invites educators to strengthen the connection among children’s ecological systems.”

—**Shu-Chen “Jenny” Yen, Ph. D.**, professor, child and adolescent studies, California State University, Fullerton

“Lauren Starnes has written a beautiful and much-needed resource for our field inside her new book. Early childhood educators, leaders, and parents can all utilize Lauren’s wonderfully crafted communication tools for having elegant conversations with young children in challenging times. The world needs this book. Well done!”

—**Kris Murray**, founder of The Child Care Success Academy

“Research tells us in no uncertain terms that caring, responsive adults stand to play a hugely important role in helping young children learn to work through their feelings. What becomes far less certain when confronted with complex family and social issues ranging from drug abuse and deployment to death or divorce, however, is just where to begin, much less how to engage in such daunting conversations. That’s where *Big Conversations* comes in. Rather than steering clear, Dr. Starnes offers clear and concise language and real-world examples to help fellow early educators confidently rise to the challenge. Complete with detailed and developmentally appropriate strategies and plenty of printable pages designed specifically to be shared with families, this book offers anyone who cares about young children’s well-being a framework for respectfully supporting them and their families through tough times.”

—**Laura Jana, MD, FAAP**, pediatrician, educator, health communicator, and author of *The Toddler Brain*

“We are already having big conversations with little children in the early childhood setting, but we might not be *ready* for them. Dr. Starnes’s book prepares the practitioner for meaningful connection with kids on a great variety of big conversations with nearly an encyclopedia of examples. Her specific guidance for supporting social and emotional experiences in young children is spot-on and she provides clear verbiage for early educators to use with example conversations alongside supporting research and evidence-based practice. While it may not be possible to have all the answers all the time, *Big Conversations with Little Children* will light the path for thoughtful, responsive, and connected conversations when we don’t know where to begin.”

—**Molly Breen, M.A., E.C.E.**, preschool director, St. Paul, MN



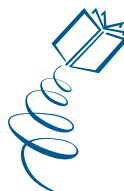


BIG Conversations with **Little** **Children**

Addressing Questions, Worries, and Fears

Lauren Starnes, Ed.D.

free spirit
PUBLISHING®



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Introduction

“There is no trust more sacred than the one the world holds with children.”

—Kofi Annan

To work with young children is to constantly encounter the unexpected. Every early childhood educator aims to help young children make connections to what they are learning by linking something new to a prior experience, and to encourage children to ask questions about what they are curious about, wondering about, and wanting more information about. Given this dynamic, young children frequently ask questions about seemingly disconnected concepts or about topics teachers are not expecting or prepared to discuss. This may be a conversation about why cats are purple on a cartoon but not in real life, or a question about a parental argument a child overheard and a puzzling new word, *divorce*.

Building and Nurturing Trust

As early childhood educators it is our role, above all things, to build and nurture trust with the children in our care. This trust is built in many ways, but especially through:

- ▶ our continuous, consistent presence in children’s lives
- ▶ naturalistic observation of the child—what motivates the child, what interests the child, how the child expresses emotions, and how the child tends to respond to situations
- ▶ conversation where the child is given opportunities to speak and to have us fully present and listening
- ▶ care for the child’s emotional, social, and physical well-being

When facing an unexpected question or comment from a child, it’s imperative to maintain these dynamics. A child asking a question of an adult does so because they trust the adult, feel the adult is able to help, and genuinely seek to *know*. While the emotionality of the question or the topic may cause us initial surprise, it is critical to stop, take a breath, and approach the conversation with respect, honesty, and love.

Likewise, it’s critical that we maintain open, two-way communication with families. Families will frequently seek out their child’s teacher or care provider as a resource, a trusted confidant and support during difficult times. Many parents* see

* The terms *parents* and *family adults* are used interchangeably throughout this book. Children may live with parents, stepparents, foster parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, or other caring adults. Likewise, children may live with a mom and dad, with two moms, with two dads, with a single parent, or in other family configurations. In this book, information related to *parents* applies to whoever these adults may be in the lives of the children in your setting.

the early childhood educator as an extension of the family or, at the very least, an important member of their child's community. With all the unknowns that come from raising children, many families will confide in you and seek your advice as it relates to child and family issues.

This is a lot to ask—and added to it is the reality that many of the issues children face and ponder are concerns we grapple with as adults as well. We live in a world where terror attacks, war, famine, natural disasters, and health crises are ongoing; these major world events permeate our radio, television, internet, and adult conversations. And the words of Margaret Mead from decades ago ring truer today than ever before: “The young are seeing history being made before it is censored by their elders.” We have to be aware that, like their elders, young children are likely seeing, hearing, and trying to make sense of the news. More personal stressors at home or among extended family and friends can be just as unsettling and confusing: death, illness, divorce, loss of job, and military deployments to name a few. Children will inevitably ask questions and express concerns about what is going on around them.

As adults, we learn to compartmentalize. We find ways to sort the issues into likely threats, improbable threats, and impossible threats to self. We try to make peace with the world, stay steady, and live our best lives. Young children have not yet learned these skills.

Adults may be inclined to assume that young children are unaware, unfamiliar, not listening, and not wondering or worrying. This could not be further from the truth. Children learn from an early age to pay careful attention to what is said to them and around them, along with what is expressed nonverbally. Infants and young toddlers can discern tone of voice and may exhibit a stress response when the verbal and nonverbal messages of a trusted adult are misaligned. And while older toddlers and preschoolers may not know or grasp all the vocabulary of what they overhear being discussed, an adult's emotional expressions and attempts to shield the conversation from the child signal that the topic is important. This may inadvertently lead a child to try to listen or attend more closely.

Children's resulting anxieties can be exacerbated by fears derived from real-life events. A child may focus excessively upon an event or feel it is larger or has greater impact than it actually does. The reality of a divorce may lead a child to think both parents are going away. The reality of a death may lead a child to think that other people in their life are dying. The reality of terror events in places far from a child's home may lead a child to think that their own home and community are under attack. In some situations, the child's community itself may indeed be threatened, yet children still need to be helped to feel safe in such circumstances. Even when adults themselves struggle to understand and navigate events or grapple with difficult situations and experiences, children need those adults to hear their questions and provide answers and support with as much reassurance as possible.

Fred Rogers famously said, “When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’” This is true, and knowing there are adult helpers can go

A Word About Gender Language in This Book

This book uses the singular pronouns *they*, *them*, and *their* rather than *she or he*, *him or her*, and *his or her*. The book also uses *they*, *them*, and *their* when referring specifically to individuals whose pronouns are nonbinary. As much as possible, the sample conversations and dialogues are inclusive of all genders for both adults and children. Unless specifically noted, the information and suggestions apply to all early educators, children, and family members.

a long way toward supporting young children's feelings of safety and validation. Even in situations and experiences that try the human spirit, children need to know that the trusted adults around them are committed to their well-being and are working to make the world as safe as it can be.

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Preparing for Your Role

Big Conversations with Little Children is designed to support adults in having potentially difficult or emotionally charged conversations with young children while ensuring the conversations provide children ways to express and explore their feelings. What makes some conversations so difficult to have, particularly with children?

Often the root cause is that the issue being discussed itself is socially charged or invokes very strong personal reactions. This can lead the adult to question not only what to say but how best to say it without making assumptions, oversharing, or being inappropriately opinionated.

Equally as often, the topic is difficult to discuss because it centers on an issue that activates emotion in the adult or may potentially spark emotion in the child. And as we all well know, young children are more likely than not to pipe up with an unexpected question at an unexpected time. Therefore, the adult may be mentally, emotionally, and socially unprepared to have the conversation and may lack background knowledge on the issue or about the child's particular situation.

As the educator, you are regarded as the expert and so you can expect tough questions to arise in your regular interactions with children and families. Preparation is the key that can help you in this role.

As the educator, you are regarded as the expert and so you can expect tough questions to arise in your regular interactions with children and families. Preparation is the key that can help you in this role, and this book is intended to provide it. With thoughtful preparation, you can build the knowledge and skills needed to handle the unexpected. This book can be your resource when a child asks

Consider a Community of Practice

Difficult conversations with young children and their families don't occur in a vacuum: it's natural and expected that some discussions will evoke personal responses and sometimes intense emotions in teachers and care providers. Like the children in our care, we too experience turmoil—job loss, addiction, marriage difficulties, illness, death, violence, upheaval. Our family makeup, our culture, our race, our gender, and those of our friends and loved ones are complex and can present us with questions and worries, just as they do for children.

As you focus on answering the “big” questions raised by small children, it's wise to take time to reflect on and explore your own emotions around the topics. Doing this will help you feel more grounded and confident in supporting the children in your care. One effective way to be intentional about this exploration is by forming a community of practice to discuss the topics with other adults who work with you in your setting.

A community of practice is a group of people who work and learn together over time about a challenge or concern they all share. You and your colleagues might meet regularly to discuss how to navigate teachers' personal emotions in the face of difficult conversations with children, or you might focus on a topic that has emerged as particularly important in your setting, such as racism or food insecurity. A community of practice lets you address your own apprehensions, look back on and evaluate your actions, gain self-awareness, learn from your own experience and that of others, consider new ideas, and plan for the future. It is a safe place to have “real” conversations.

In speaking to colleagues about sensitive topics, or about situations that have occurred in your classroom, it's essential that you protect confidentiality of everyone in the group and of the children and families in your school or program.

Learn more about starting a community of practice:

- ★ *Growing Together: Developing and Sustaining a Community of Practice in Early Childhood* by Kathi Gillaspie, Megan Vinh, Nancy Surbrook-Goins, and Sarah Nichols
- ★ *Reflecting in Communities of Practice: A Workbook for Early Childhood Educators* by Deb Curtis, Debbie Lebo, Wendy C. M. Cividanes, and Margie Carter

you a difficult question and when an adult, such as a parent or another teacher, seeks your support in approaching difficult topics with a young child.

Families look to their child's school or child care setting and often to their child's teacher for support in multiple realms of child development. Early childhood education is, after all, a field that requires and relies upon interdependence among educators and families. Trust is the cornerstone of the field: trust from parent to teacher, from teacher to parent, from child to parent, and from children to teacher. This dynamic requires that a teacher evaluate and act upon a child's best interest in all situations.

Open rapport between educators and families is essential from the beginning of this relationship. Being a consistent presence in the classroom at times when families are present, asking the family open-ended questions about the child and events in the child's life, and sharing observations with the family are key ways to establish this rapport. The child is the bridge uniting the relationship, and it is imperative that anything said about the child or in the presence of the child always be respectful. This respect carries forth into answering the child's questions. A question asked by a child should be respected, honored, and answered. The goal of this book is to guide and empower you with the confidence and developmental appropriateness to have these difficult and important conversations whenever and however they occur.

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About This Book

Big Conversations with Little Children consists of two main parts:

Part I: Preparing for Difficult Conversations addresses how to cultivate understanding and partnership among the adults involved. Here you will find suggestions on questions to ask parents to determine the best way to approach a child's questions or concerns. Part I also helps you anticipate three types of conversations or questions to be prepared for:

- ▶ Conversations between a parent and teacher. This might involve the family member asking the teacher for advice, support, or suggestions (such as a father asking the teacher about how to tell his child about a miscarriage) or the teacher letting a family adult know about something the child brought up (such as a question about gender).
- ▶ Conversations between the teacher and the individual child (such as speaking with a child who experienced a death in the family or a child who is questioning the major illness of a family member).
- ▶ Conversations between the teacher and a class or group of children (such as discussing ways the community and children are affected by a natural disaster or the death of a classmate).

Part I includes an overview of need-to-know information for having important conversations with families and with young children, specifically about ensuring developmental appropriateness, maintaining neutrality, speaking with parents first, perceiving emotions, and evaluating the context of a conversation. It also offers guidance for determining what to share among other adults and staff in the school.

Part II: Conversation Topics addresses specific subjects of potentially difficult conversations you might have with a young child:

- ▶ **Family** topics cover issues that happen at home and require especially close or sensitive communication with the family.
- ▶ **Illness and death** topics include those that all children might experience, such as the death of a classroom pet or a teacher's illness, as well as those that are more personal to a given child, such as the death of a relative or a sibling's disease.
- ▶ **Social issues** topics address conversations around race, gender, and other cultural matters, such as one preschooler telling another she can't be Princess Elsa because she is Black or a child wondering why someone has a mom and a dad while someone else has two dads.
- ▶ **Upheaval and violence** topics offer ways to reply to children's concerns—whether about a crisis that is far away, such as a terror event the child has seen or heard about on television, or one that is closer to home, such as a storm that ruined people's homes or a shooting in the community or school.

Part II can be referenced by topic. For each topic you will find an overview of how families and children might respond to the issue, suggestions for discussing the subject with family adults, examples of how to reply to a child's questions and how to invite a conversation with a child as needed, and ideas for following up. Each topic also includes information for parents and other family adults with suggestions for responding to children's questions at home; ways to handle unexpected questions and concerns; and books, websites, or other resources parents may find helpful.

The topics included reflect many that are likely to emerge in conversations with young children, but the list is not exhaustive. The guidance and examples provided can help ground you in general approaches that can be extended and applied to other issues that may arise.

Each section contains **family take-home pages** with information for parents on how to talk with children about the topic. You can photocopy these pages

directly from the book or download and print them to give to family adults. Be sure to read these handouts yourself—they give some additional information and can support you in your conversations with families.

Also included with the family take-home pages is an introductory letter explaining to families that this book is being used by

Use this book as a guide, not an instructional manual. The dialogues are examples of language and approaches and are not meant to be scripts to follow verbatim. Once you become familiar with the underlying goals for a given type of conversation, you can adjust the language to the needs of a particular situation and to your own way of speaking.

their children's teachers and that information pages on various topics are available for parents and caregivers. See page 218 to learn how to download this letter and the family take-home pages.

Use this book as a guide, not an instructional manual. The dialogues are examples of language and approaches and are not meant to be scripts to follow verbatim. Once you become familiar with the underlying goals for a given type of conversation, you can adjust the language to the needs of a particular situation and to your own way of speaking.

It's not your role, or the purpose of this book, to work through a complex family or social problem with a young child or to "fix" such a problem. Rather, you are there as a trusted sounding board who allows the child space and comfort for talking about how they feel and who communicates with families about the worries and feelings children share with you. You always want to support a child emotionally in a way that gives only the information the child needs and is developmentally ready to understand.



Thank you for all that you do to better the lives of young children and solidify a stronger tomorrow. Your caring and thoughtful work with children will leave a legacy.

I would love to know how *Big Conversations with Little Children* has supported you in working with young children and their families. I also welcome learning about other ideas you have or additional topics you've addressed with the children in your care. Please write to me through my publisher at help4kids@freespirit.com.

Lauren Starnes, Ed.D.

PART I

Preparing for Difficult Conversations

Preparation is key when it comes to difficult conversations. Being *emotionally* prepared and *verbally* prepared are equally important. As a trusted adult you need to be emotionally calm and approach questions young children ask with respect, caring, honesty, and objectivity. It's natural for emotions to surface in the face of a child's questions or worries, but often an adult's emotional reaction can unintentionally silence the child. With intention and practice, you can learn to take a deep breath, pause, and then answer the child with a relaxed tone and facial expression. It's also possible to prepare for what to say and how to respond to the unexpected statement or question.

Part I will guide you on how you approach challenging conversations with families, children, and other staff members in ways that are developmentally appropriate for children and with full respect for privacy. There are always two types of “big” conversations when it comes to young children:

- ▶ the planned conversation where the adult leads the discussion or is well prepared to address expected questions
- ▶ the unplanned, spontaneous question or shared information that comes seemingly out of the blue

In Part I, and throughout the book, you will find guidance on how to approach both.



Partnering with Families About Communicating with Children

“Children are the priority. Change is the reality.
Collaboration is the strategy.”

—Judith Billings

It is essential that early childhood teachers find a method to learn from families on a daily basis how their child is feeling and functioning, generally speaking. This best practice ensures consistent communication and provides you with critical insight that can help you support the child. Learning that “Vinnie didn’t sleep well last night” or “Makayla woke up grumpy this morning” gives you information about the child’s demeanor and emotions and cues you to things to be mindful of or signs and symptoms to be watching for. This daily communication also builds trust and opens dialogue for other potential topics.

General Family Check-In Questions

To invite daily information from families, you might greet family adults at drop-off, use a form that is sent home with the child, or email or text a parent. Questions like the following can foster this brief exchange:

- ▶ “How is Xavier doing at home?”
- ▶ “How was Peyton’s weekend/evening?”
- ▶ “Is there anything new I should know?”
- ▶ “How did Ava sleep last night?”
- ▶ “How is Kaylee feeling today?”
- ▶ “How has Ryan’s morning been so far?”
- ▶ “Malachi seems to be in a very good mood today. What is he so happy about this afternoon?”
- ▶ “How is the Rodriguez family doing today?”
- ▶ “Emma has a birthday coming up. How are you feeling about her turning four?”
- ▶ “I have not seen Mom/Dad in a few days. How is she/he doing?”

Framework for Parent Conversation Starters

Having these daily check-ins also provides an opening when family members—or you—need to have a potentially challenging conversation. Initiating a conversation with a parent or family member after an unexpected discussion with a child may feel awkward. To begin, the key things you want to do are let the family member know what the child expressed and how it was addressed, and then open a dialogue for any additional information the family may wish to provide. The following give examples of how this may be approached:

- ▶ “Today Jeremy asked me about where dogs go when they die. I shared what happened with my pet when she died, and I want to respect you and your family’s wishes in how I respond with Jeremy. How would you like me to address this with him if the topic comes up in discussion again?”
- ▶ “Today Michael built a structure in the block center. His friend asked him what it was, and he said it was a jail where his uncle was going. I want to respect your family’s wishes in how I talk about this with Michael. I have a conversation guide that has additional resources that might help your family talk with him about it, if you’re interested.”
- ▶ “Izzy wanted to write a letter to Grandpa today to tell him not to die in the hospital. I want to be sure to talk with Izzy about this in the way you wish me to. Is there something you’d like me to say or emphasize if Izzy brings up Grandpa again? This must be a difficult time, and I do have a resource that may help your family talk with Izzy about what’s happening. Would you like a copy?”
- ▶ “This morning, Maggie was extremely concerned about going outside—she said she was afraid a tornado would come back. I immediately reassured her that she was safe, and I comforted her. May I share with you how I would like to approach this topic with Maggie if it comes up again, so we can discuss and plan together? I want to handle this in a way that’s comfortable for your family.”

Next Steps: Taking the Conversation Further

After checking in with the family, your next conversation may be between you and the child, or between you and the parent. It is important to consider the topic, the impact, and the context to determine the best way to proceed.

Conversation with a single child. Often, before or after an initial conversation with a family adult, you will find yourself having a conversation with a single child about a personal issue that is affecting that child and that child alone. It does not