

insights



How much is too much to tell our kids?

by Dimity Sharpe

In a world where transparency is the new black, does modern day parenting need to follow suit? Do our children need to know explicit details about relationship breakdowns, disability or themselves?

Culture of transparency

As a teacher I am increasingly being challenged by children who tell me they can't engage in particular activities because of ailments or labels that they throw across the desk like a fidget spinner. Truly out of the mouths of babes comes very adult language and concepts like 'diagnosis', 'ADHD' and brain problems. There are also relationship observations such as "Dad's too busy for us, my parents are separated".

We seem to have created a culture where discussing these often complex issues is done openly and in great detail. Perhaps this is reflective of the greater transparency we see in the world today, with personal information being shared on social media and reality TV.

Our society has evolved to favour transparency in most aspects of life. It's the new norm. But is it in the best interests of our children's wellbeing that our parenting follows suit?

My gut says no. When a child says these things, I find my heart skipping a beat. I can see by the way kids casually deliver these terms and labels that they don't – they simply can't -- understand what they are saying and what it means for their own identity.

The dangers of labelling

I'm sure that most adults can remember a time when they were given a particular label as child. You're the "clever one", you're "not good at sport", you're "better at maths". How many of those things stayed with us into adulthood and continue to change the way we perceive ourselves? Were those thoughts

responsible for us not attempting things, a subconscious block to our learning and development?

This issue becomes even more difficult in relation to a disability or difficulty. When we tell a child about a disability or difficulty that they are experiencing, we are potentially giving them a story to follow. We are telling them ‘this is what you are’. Of course we don’t mean for this to have a negative effect, and we are for the most part trying to help the child. But disability is difficult. Often as adults we are left without concrete answers and we struggle to cope, so how then do we expect a child to be able to effectively deal with these issues?



Children’s brains are poor processors

The problem is, and this has been beautifully articulated by Michael Grose, that children are essentially poor processors. Their brains do not process information the same way as an adult brain does.

How many times has a child told you “everyone hates me” or “I did nothing on the weekend”? They see things in absolutes, black and white. Of course they did things on the weekend, and often with

structure and encouragement targeted at the children’s developmental level you will find out that the events of the weekend were vast.

We don’t teach six year olds about calculus because their brains are not ready for that. They don’t have the mathematical building blocks to understand those higher order concepts. How then do we expect that children will be able to weed through the true facts and ramifications of delivering news like, “We are going to the doctor to see why your brain isn’t working properly”.

As adults we often find solace in more information, more details. But as adults we can sort this information: our brains and bodies can let go of things we know are not important. We can seek the support of other adults. We can google things. Children aren’t equipped the same way. They are told something and it becomes a fact. Real. It becomes a part of who they are.

By tailoring the narrative you give your children to better suit their developmental age and stage in life, by telling them just enough to get them through, you give their minds and bodies a better chance to process complex issues.

How much is enough?

The question then becomes how much is enough? When children ask where babies come from, we don't tell them the intricate details of reproduction. We tell them just enough to satisfy their curiosity. "Mummy's tummy" is enough for some young children. Then as they grow developmentally and their mental faculties expand, their questions evolve and so can our answers.



Schools are increasingly adopting the Growth Mindset philosophy, that is, that intellect is not finite, it's a growth process. We work at things, we make mistakes and we progress.

I encourage you to try to tailor what you are telling your children to align with their developmental age and abilities. Support them and in time they may seek further answers. Be confident that you have told them enough and that you aren't swamping them with too much information for them to accurately process!



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