

POP-UP PARENTING

Talking About God with Children

1. Ask.

By the age of six or seven years old, children — especially those brought up around any sort of religious observance — have almost definitely thought about God. Though many ask themselves, it's not uncommon for them to be unsure about how to broach the topic, or to be uncertain about whether it's something they can question.

2. It's Jewish to Give Multiple Answers.

One thing that makes our tradition so rich is that there are almost always multiple answers to “why” questions. Though our inclination as parents might be to give simple, black-and-white answers to questions, don't hesitate to give multiple answers (even if they conflict). Doing so teaches children that important questions rarely have simple answers, honors our tradition's commitment to embracing the complex nature of the world, and allows them to pick the answer that “works” for them while allowing them to change their mind if it stops working sometime in the future.

It is ok, however, to point out which answer works best for you, or which answer you grew up believing. (And honest disagreement between parents is ok, too.)

3. Tell Stories.

Adults tend to discuss theology — and most things religious in nature — using abstract language. (That's because, to adults, they're abstract concepts.) Children benefit from more *tachlis* discussion. As Rabbi David Wolpe teaches, “Children are less adept at manipulating abstract concepts than they are at understanding concrete operational ideas.” Narrative is the way that human beings turn the abstract into the concrete.

4. Be Descriptive

Descriptive, clear language provides for answers that children can incorporate into their understanding of the world. (Be thoughtful. Often, adults use abstract language without even meaning to.) Rabbi Wolpe's example: “Rather than ‘God knows everything,’ try to be specific: ‘God is the one who helps us to grow.’”

5. Figure Out Where You Are.

You don't need to have a clearly articulated theological position. You don't need to be totally confident and steadfast in everything you believe. You should, however, give some thought to what it is you believe (and if there are things about which you're uncomfortable or especially uncertain). In most cases, children value answers that are genuine and authentic above all else.

6. Learn.

It's always helpful to be able to draw on a depth of understanding. If your kids are asking tough Jewish questions, it's a fabulous opportunity to expand your own knowledge base. (And while you're at it: Tell your children that you're learning, too. It can be very empowering for them to know that you take this stuff seriously.)

7. “I Don't Know” is OK.

If a question really throws you for a loop, it's ok to say, “I don't know.” In fact, it's probably preferable if it's the most intellectually honest answer. Just make sure you immediately follow “I don't know,” with something like:

- “Let's ask the rabbi together.”
- “But let me see if I can find out. Let's talk about it tomorrow.” (And then make sure to talk about it tomorrow.)
- “That's one of those things that's beyond people's understanding. But I'm sure that Jews have found some interesting ways to answer that question. Let's ask (insert name of a trusted Jewish teacher) and see if s/he has any ideas.”