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Interview with Al Roker

Sex and race: How to talk to your kids

AL ROKER:

Every parent knows answering kids' questions about sensitive topics can be challenging. So how do you prepare yourself and other caretakers for the tough questions? Well, Genevieve Thiers, CEO of Sittercity.com and iVillage's Babysitting Expert is here to tell us. Good to see you.

GENEVIEVE THIERS:

Nice to see you again, Al.

ROKER:

Now, I think that as many kids as there are, there are that many different questions out there, but there are some basic topics that can generally make parents squirm.

THIERS:

Right. Issues about sex, issues about race, issues about money or divorce, or even national tragedies and breaking news that kids might see – all of that can lead to really difficult questions. I remember one of my friends said – after the Virginia Tech shooting – that her daughter came to her and said, "Mommy, is it safe to go to school?" That's a difficult question!

ROKER:

So, what do parents do – what's a good strategy, you know, when you're talking about these questions that may make you squirm a little bit?

THIERS:

Well the first thing to do is to encourage your kids to ask those difficult questions. Kids are getting barraged these days with lots of different kinds of things from the media and

from their friends, and so you can create that safe haven for them, that place where they can go, and you always want them to come and talk to YOU.

Monitor your reaction as well. When you're talking to your kids and when you get a difficult question from them, try not to appear concerned or upset. That may make them feel guilty...

ROKER:

Because they're kind of reflecting what you're doing.

THIERS:

Right, exactly. If you're having trouble answering a difficult question, draw on the values and morals and the faith that you're teaching your kids as well because that allows you to be consistent, and it also allows you to teach them about who they are.

ROKER:

So is it better to wait for them to bring these things up, or should you initiate?

THIERS:

Well, that's a tricky one, Al. Sometimes you're just not going to be able to predict. Sometime you're going to get a question that comes out of left field and you're just going to have to deal with it, but sometimes you CAN predict.

If you know your family's going to go through a divorce, for example, or there's a breaking tragedy like Katrina or something like that, you should talk to the kids right away. Before they even ask you questions, you should bring up that difficult topic because, again, you can control what they're hearing about that before they hear about it from a friend, or a teacher. You can talk to them first.

ROKER:

What about age-appropriateness?

THIERS:

Oh, right. Well you definitely have to approach younger kids differently than older kids. Kids that are under the age of 8, keep it simple, don't use a lot of big words and also resist the urge to help them along, to jump in and insert words or statements. Sometimes it can take them a while to get where they're going, so be patient.

For older kids, just play it straight. Kids over the age of 8 want to be treated like adults. They don't want you to sugarcoat it. Often they might surprise you with opinions of their own, and they're heard about it before they've even gotten to you.

ROKER:

And certain kids – or certain aged kids – shouldn't it be where you maybe kind of cut yourself off because we tend as adults to over-explain? And all of a sudden, the kid's like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa. TMI."

THIERS:

Yeah, "Wait, wait, I just wanted to know how you felt about it!" You know, it's funny. I think that's when you get nervous and think, "Uh oh, I have to answer this one right." But, often, just having the conversation with them is really what they want. They could surprise you.

ROKER:

You're not around your kids 24 hours a day. There are teachers and babysitters, caregivers. How do you impart to that baby-sitter, that caregiver what they should do in case your child asks *them* a difficult question?

THIERS:

Right. Well, one of the first things that you want to do at the opening interview or the first job is talk to them about the values and the faith and the morals that you're raising your kids with so they have some chance of answering a difficult question when they get one. But at the same time, it is OK to talk to them as well about deferring.

And you can find information online that you can give to them. Sites like iVillage.com and Sittercity.com have lists of ways that you can defer questions that you might get.

It is also all right to ask the caregiver to monitor your kids if they're having nightmares, trouble sleeping, they keep asking incessantly about one thing -- they should let you know so you can be prepared when you get home to deal with that issue with your kids.

ROKER:

Genevieve, a lot of good advice. Thanks so much.

THIERS:

Thanks, Al.

ROKER:

If you want more information about talking to your kids on sensitive subjects, check out Todayshow.com and visit the iVillage community.