

Talk with children about difficult matters



"These kids have all a father or a mother with anxiety or depression. They have just entered the boat. In spite of that, they seem to know each other. For they have experienced similar things..."

Quotation from the book
"talk about it...with every children"

*Jesper Juul, writer and family therapist (text)
Pia Olsen, illustrations and photos*

This article is meant to be my contribution to make people aware of the splendid work Karen Glistrup, social worker and family therapist, has achieved and what she has been writing for more than twenty years. Her latest book "Talk about it...with all children" is of outstanding quality also measured by international standard, and this work is the best starting point for talks between children and their ill parents. These talks have so far been non-existing, and that is caused by a lot of outdated professional attitudes. One of these attitudes, still quite powerful, is the conception of not burdening children with too 'heavy' information. Therefore I will start this article with a clinical example in which I took part as a family therapist some years ago. It took place in Slovenia, and I mention this because many Slovenians at that time found it honourable to keep silent about almost anything you could imagine would be harmful for children. I.e. it was not unusual to keep it a secret for months if parents, siblings, or grandparents were seriously ill or have died. I have also chosen this example because it is about a one year old child, and therefore it is under the area of responsibility of the health care nurses.

M: (sitting with the child in her arms) Sorry, that I go on weeping, but a few days ago my best friend and neighbour lost her 3 year old son because of medical negligence. I was his godmother and I was together with him every day. I have asked for a talk with you because I think my present feelings might harm my little daughter.

J: What makes you think that?

M: Every time I breast feed her, she stops eating and starts whimpering when I try to make her suck again or give her the second breast.

J: Now try to keep on talking with me (the same thing happened after one minute. The little girl let go of the nipple and looked up at the face of the mother). If you look closely, I think you might see the same as me: A friendly, curious and completely open expression with eyes asking, "What is the matter with you, mum?"

M: Yes, I see that, but what am I going to do to make her eat again?

J: You will have to answer her question: Look at her with a loving glimpse in your eyes and tell her the same as you just told me in a language that you would use when telling a good friend. Take your time, and go on till you feel empty for what made you sad. Give her a big kiss on the forehead when you have finished talking. Look

into her eyes and say, "You may eat again when you feel like it".

M: But will she understand it when she is so small?

J: Yes, sure. She will not understand the words, but she will read your face, listen to your tone of voice and your body language.

The key to this interpersonal magic is the adult's ability and will to express herself personally (firstperson) and in the same eye level.

M: It feels a bit artificial, but now I will try.

Two sentences from the mum and her words came from the 'tommy', as we say. When she had finished and sat with a smile of relief, the daughter replied with a big warm smile, relaxed totally in her body and sought the mum's breast. And now she had a hearty meal and fell asleep.

M: But that is what I always wanted to do, but I thought it was wrong. Now I will visit my friend, tell her about this, and I will say to her that she can talk to her baby and to the 7 year old one too.

While she packed her child into the babylift and put on her own coat, I had the opportunity to explain to her that children of all ages always will sense the parents' mood and that every attempt to conceal the truth will be revealed and will leave the child confused and with an experience of not being good enough. This should not make the parents pour out their sorrow, their anger and helplessness over the heads of their innocent children. They could end their talk like this, saying "I don't know what to do, but I will find a solution together with your dad, your mum, the nurse etc. Thank you for listening" or something similar, telling the child that the grown up is in charge and will go on being responsible.

The key to this interpersonal magic is the adult's ability and will to express herself personally (first person) and in the same eye level. When the mum does this in my story, two things happen: She will have some of her sorrow removed, a sorrow, that was a hindrance in the contact between herself and the daughter, and at the same time she will share her feelings and thoughts with yet another human being, which will help her to cope with her loss.

The errand of Karen Glistrup is a bit different, as she here in this book gives away her experience of how grown ups – both the ill ones and other important grown ups – can talk with children of all ages about the situation. Of course this is especially important when mum or dad gets ill and eventually is hospitalized. But also during the course, how long it may turn out to be.

One of Karen Glistrup's other major books "What children do not know...will hurt them" Hans Reitzel 2014, provides many detailed explanations based on

evidence and experience of why the old myths should not go on dominating, and why you very often need professionals to help parents learning the difference between enriching and straining the relationship with the child.

"Talk about it" is not only about the importance of talking with children about mental and somatic illness, but indeed also about sharing joy, exciting and difficult experiences with children.

As a matter of fact the measure is that whatever happens in the grown ups' lives, what you can feel in your body or what might occupy your mind, all this you should share with your child. Form and content depends on the age of the child and one has to consider the personal limits of the parents and the integrity of the involved persons.

It is for example all right and even necessary to say, "I have spoken to mum/dad on the phone today. And it was not so nice. But I think we will find a solution". Finish the line with a hug and go on to something different. No child needs the details- even if he/she goes on asking for more information.

In the same way it is necessary and okay to say, "I had coffee with a colleague today, and we had a wonderful time. I feel like bubbling inside, that's how happy I felt." Don't say, "I think I am in love again" before you know for sure that this is a stable relationship.

With parents children tend to notice the slightest change in mood, and when they are 2-3 years old they start to ask questions into the matter. When you have

to consider the mutual trust and the openness, you will have to answer the questions, but you do not have to go into details.

An example: "Yes, I had an experience at work today, an unpleasant one, and I might tell you

about it one day when I am ready". With this line you have been a model for your child who also has to cope in close relationships without exposing herself/himself totally every time. Most children are happy with short and honest answers and they will forget the case.

The alternative- to hide the truth- will not only lead to the crumbling of the mutual trust, but will also lead to the fact that too many children will deduce that something must be wrong with themselves. As a rule the result will be either a withdrawal from the relation or a new need to 'demand attention' as you named it in the old days.

I am one of those people who appreciates Per Schulz Joergensen's relaunched concept "resilience".

Parents who follow Karen Glistrup's recommendations

'Talk about it' is not only about the importance of talking with children about mental and somatic illness, but indeed also about sharing joy, exciting and difficult experiences with children.

serve to make their children and themselves more resilient/more apt for life. They can grow even stronger by reading these two new books by the author: 'Inside me... and in the others' and 'Dad, mum ... and kids', Gyldendal.



All the books with free reading examples you can find here: www.snak-om-det.dk/da

“Thank you very much for writing the book ‘talk about it... with every child.’ I am an adult with mental illness but when I read the book I felt the child in me who grew up with parents who had untreated mental health challenges was being acknowledged by someone. Now I am a parent who is trying my best to be a good parent and manage my own mental illness. I appreciated how you approached this challenging but important topic.”

ELIZABETH NESTLERODE, PORTLAND, OREGON

“I strongly agree with the way in which this book approaching both the children and their parents. It can be helpful in our practice and it can help parents as well as mental health workers to talk to children. I am pleased to recommend the book to my networks here in Europe as well as worldwide.”

KARIN VAN DOESUM, PHD. PSYCHOLOGIST/RESEARCHER
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Facts about Jesper Juul

Jesper Juul was the leader of the Kempler Institute from 1979 to 2005, where he founded the non-profit and for people enlightening organisation FamilyLab which is active in 20 countries: family-lab.com

JJ is the author of more than 20 books, all written to the most important people around the child, the parents and the professionals.

