

Preparing for the Unexpected

Parenting humans at any phase of life is filled with the unexpected.

When kids are young, we can be surprised by a toddler who has learned to remove their own diaper . . . in public, or how artistically they can draw . . . on our kitchen walls. But as our kids get older, and the stakes get higher, sometimes the unexpected discoveries we make as parents may elicit fear, anger, or confusion as we try to guide our kid toward a positive future.

This worksheet is intended to help you reflect and create a plan ahead of time for how you want to respond if you discover something you never expected. Spend as much time as you need thinking through your responses. They are not for anyone other than you (unless you choose to discuss this with your spouse, co-parent, grandparent, another caregiver, or health professional).

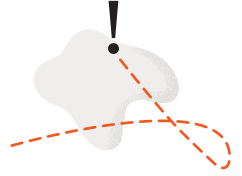
In a perfect world, every parent who discovers something they weren't expecting would do so after a good night's sleep, feeling rested, confident, and at peace with themselves and the world around them. That's seldom the case. That's why it's best to create a response plan when you are clear and thoughtful. So, take a few, deep breaths. Find a place where you feel safe and comfortable. If you need to walk away and come back to this at a later time, that's okay, too.

What do we mean by “the unexpected”?

This is an open-ended idea, because our kids are growing up in a world with a vast number of unexpected scenarios. So, in one sense, we can't predict what we can't predict. But according to leaders who work with kids and teenagers, and research provided by U.S. census data, the CDC, and the American Academy of Pediatrics, here are a few scenarios that can be a part of a kid's world that parents frequently fail to anticipate:

- Cutting and Self-harm
- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Depression/Anxiety
- Bullying
- Vaping
- Eating disorder
- Suicidal thoughts
- Same-sex attraction
- Pornography addiction
- Underage sexting/Sexual activity
- Possession of illegal pornography
- Gender confusion
- Unplanned pregnancy
- DUI or Drunk Driving related car accidents
- Alcohol poisoning
- Vandalism/theft
- Pharmaceutical and illegal drug addictions

React Now So You Can Prepare for Later



What is your initial reaction when you read that list?

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Consider your own past. Do any of those possible scenarios above trigger additional thoughts or levels of emotion in you due to your own personal life experience?

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Imagine that you discover one of the scenarios listed. What is the very first thing you would hope to say to your kid?

Here are a few things to remember as you write:

1. You don't have to say everything right away. Create a safe space for them to talk and try to actively listen.
2. Your first response may determine whether your kid will feel comfortable talking about this again with you in the future.
3. Your response can be as simple as:
 - "Thank you for telling me."
 - "I know you probably didn't intend for me to find out."
 - "I hope we can always talk about everything no matter what."
 - "I love you, and absolutely nothing changes that. I want to talk more about this, but I need some time to process everything. We will revisit this sometime soon."

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Read what you have written above out loud three times. Try to use the tone and body language you would want to have if you were saying this to your kid.

Here are a few things to remember as you read:

1. It's normal to feel a strong, emotional response—but it may be helpful to freak out on the inside and remain calm on the outside.
2. Most of our communication happens through our facial expressions and the tone of our voice. You might even practice reading your response in front of a mirror to see what you are communicating nonverbally.

Now, imagine that you discover one of the scenarios listed after you have had a particularly horrible day. Despite our best intentions, conversations with our kids can veer in the wrong direction. Think about some of your least ideal go-to reactions. What might you do to help yourself have the best reaction? (pause, take three deep breaths, and/or reframe the conversation from lecturing to learning)

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Take the list of items previously listed and add any additional scenarios you can think of. Now, rate each one based on how equipped you feel to handle the scenario.

If you feel well-equipped, write the number 10 next to that possible situation. If you feel unequipped, write the number 1 next to that possible situation.

- _____ Cutting and Self-harm
- _____ Physical abuse
- _____ Sexual abuse
- _____ Depression/Anxiety
- _____ Bullying
- _____ Vaping
- _____ Eating disorder
- _____ Suicidal thoughts
- _____ Same-sex attraction
- _____ Pornography addiction
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- _____
- _____
- _____

For the scenarios for which you feel least equipped, where might you go as a first step to get help?

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Every parent has what it takes to navigate challenges with their kids, but none of us can carry the weight alone. If you were to discover something you weren't expecting in your kid's life, who would you be able to call? Think of someone with whom you feel safe enough to be completely honest about what is happening and what you are feeling.

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Every kid is navigating challenging situations needs their parent's involvement. But a parent may not be the only influence they need. If you were to discover something you weren't expecting, who else in your kid's life could you count on to walk with them through this experience? Think of someone who shares your values with whom your kid feels safe enough to be completely honest about what is happening.

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Your responses to the questions in this resource may be one of the most important things to keep in front of you as a parent. Consider returning to what you have written every year to revise and repeat your response so that you can remember it quickly if you ever need to use it.

