

What is a Teachable Moment?

A teachable moment is when something happens that gives you a chance to teach your child a lesson about life. Scenes from TV shows or movies, images from a video game, or pages of a book are full of these moments.

Use Media to Start a Conversation

Make the connection between what is happening in your kids' lives to media. Use media examples to have discussions about sharing and cooperation, new siblings, and peer pressure. For example, a book that talks about life with a step-parent might help you ease into conversations about changes in your family. You can also ask your kids if what they see in media relates to what's going on around them.

Shows and movies with more adult content provide opportunities to talk about controversial or sensitive topics like sex, drinking, and violence. An episode or commercial that features someone dying of lung cancer, for example, could lead to a discussion about the dangers of smoking.

You can also talk about how media can distort body image. Use a movie, magazine ad, or TV commercial to talk about special effects like lighting and makeup artists. Point out that just because a skinny actress on TV looks happy doesn't mean she really is, or that she's even healthy. Use buff bodies in commercials or in video games to talk about the dangers of steroid use and obsessive working out.

Remember, it's OK to:

Share your own opinion. Say why you liked—or didn't like—how the main character(s) acted.

Ask questions. Ask your kids what they would have done differently. Do they know anyone who has been in a similar situation? What did they think of how the problem was handled? Be sure to listen carefully.

Keep discussions short. You don't want your kids to fear a long analysis following every show. It's fine to simply make a passing comment or even a joke. They really are paying attention—and may come back to you later with their own thoughts.

Say “no” to certain shows. Don't allow offensive media just because they might provide you with a teachable moment. Using media to teach kids doesn't mean scaring them.

This tip sheet is adapted from an original article written by Susan Bartell and published by Common Sense Media on 12/01/05. Dr. Bartell is a child and parenting psychologist and author.