S11E3 - The Talk We Never Had

This season of The Resilient Kid Podcast is dedicated entirely to sex and relationships education.

Over the coming episodes, we'll be talking about puberty, periods, consent, and sex—honestly, accurately, and without shame.

This first episode, and the five that follow, are made for parents, carers, and educators. They are adult-facing. There is no explicit content, but these are grown-up conversations, and that's intentional.

Later in the season, we will be releasing a second set of episodes addressed directly to young people. Each of those will carry spoken age guidance at the very start so you know exactly what's in it before you share them.

If you're a young person who has found this episode, welcome. Please carry on listening if you want, but the episodes made specifically for you are coming, and they will speak to you more directly. So maybe watch out for those ones instead.

Now, this one is for the grown-ups.

Let's begin.

I want to start with a confession.

I work with young people and families for a living. I talk about difficult things every single day—grief, trauma, anxiety, family breakdown. I walk into those conversations without flinching because I've been trained to, and because I believe deeply that the most important thing we can do for a child, irrespective of age, is refuse to look away from the hard stuff.

And yet, when it came to this conversation—this particular one—I completely understand why parents freeze. Why they change the subject. Why they suddenly find the washing up absolutely fascinating the moment it comes up.

Because this one is different, isn't it?

This one is personal.

This one lands somewhere in our own bodies, in our own memories, in the particular mixture of embarrassment, vulnerability, and the sheer:

"Where do I even start with this?"

that most of us have carried since we were the ones who needed someone to have it with us.

I'm talking about sex.

About bodies.

About puberty.

About consent.

About growing up.

And all the things that happen in between childhood and adulthood that nobody gave us a manual for.

And now we're expected—somehow, without any training, any preparation, or even a decent night's sleep usually—to explain it to our kids.

So this season, we're going to do something a little bit different.

This season, we're having *the talk*.

Not in one episode, but over a whole season.

Carefully.

Honestly.

One conversation at a time.

For you.

And eventually, directly to the young people in your life.

I'm Ashley Costello, and this is **The Talk We Never Had.**

Why This Season Exists

Before I get into today's story, I want to tell you why we're doing this.

Why now.

And why a whole season.

Here at The Resilient Kid and The Resilient Teen, we work with young people, their families, and their schools every single day.

And in that work, one thing comes up more consistently than almost anything else:

The gap.

The gap between what young people need to know about their bodies, their relationships, and their safety—and what they are actually being told.

By parents who want to get it right but don't know where to start.

By schools that are covering curriculum but not always covering the real stuff.

And in that gap, young people are filling in the blanks themselves.

From friends.

From social media.

From the internet.

From pornography.

That gap has consequences.

And we see them every week.

The research backs up what we see.

The average age of first exposure to online pornography in the UK is estimated to be around 11 years old.

The Sex Education Forum consistently finds that young people feel underprepared for the reality of relationships and sex.

The Ofsted Review of Sexual Abuse in Schools, published in 2021, found that sexual harassment among young people had become so normalised that many had stopped reporting it.

This is not a scare story.

It's a call to action.

Because the same research that shows us the problem also shows us the solution.

Young people who have ongoing, honest, age-appropriate conversations with trusted adults navigate adolescence with more confidence, more safety, and significantly fewer harms.

The conversation is protective.

The conversation is proactive.

The conversation is the thing.

So that is what this season is.

Ten episodes.

Two tracks.

One for you—the grown-ups—giving you the knowledge, the language, and the courage to have these conversations at home.

And one for the young people themselves.

Honest.

Direct.

Shame-free episodes they can listen to on their own or with you.

Or maybe you want to quietly point them towards them when the moment is right.

Although I strongly encourage you to listen together.

This is the season we make that talk possible.

Pete's Story

I want to tell you about a dad.

I'm going to call him Pete.

Pete is 42.

He's funny, warm, and completely devoted to his two kids—a daughter of 13 and a son of 10.

He coaches his son's football team on a Saturday morning.

He knows every word of his daughter's favourite Taylor Swift album, even though he would probably never admit it to her.

He is, by any measure, a present, loving dad.

Pete came to speak to me not because anything had gone wrong, but because something had gone right in a way that really surprised him.

His daughter had come home from school one afternoon and announced, very matter-of-factly—something only a 13-year-old can really do—that a boy in her year had been pressurising a girl in her class to send photos.

To send nudes.

She used the right language.

She named it clearly.

She knew it was wrong.

She knew what the girl should do.

And she had already, without being asked, offered to sit with her friend while she told a trusted adult.

Pete was stunned.

Not by the situation—although that was alarming enough for a dad.

But by his daughter.

By her clarity.

By the fact that she had the language, the framework, and the confidence to act and support her friend.

He said to me:

"Where did she get that from? Because it wasn't from me. I've never talked to her about any of that."

And I said:

"I know. And that's what we need to talk about."

Because here's the thing about Pete's daughter.

She was one of the lucky ones.

She had good relationships and sex education at school.

She had a brilliant form tutor who didn't skip the hard bits.

And somewhere along the way, the information had landed.

And she'd used it.

But Pete's son?

He was ten.

Coming up to the age where things start to happen.

Questions start to form.

Information starts to come from somewhere—whether a trusted adult provides it or not.

And for Pete, for all of his warmth and presence and Saturday morning football...

He had absolutely nowhere to start.

No idea how he was going to begin this conversation.

He said to me:

"I don't even know the right words, Ashley. My dad never talked to me about any of this. I just figured it out.

Which I think probably means I got it wrong for a long time before I got it right."

We laughed.

But underneath that laugh was something else:

"I don't want that for him.

I don't want that for my son.

I just don't know how to do it differently."

Pete isn't unusual.

In the 30 years I've been working with young people and families, Pete is the rule—not the exception.

The parents who sit across from me every day and say:

"I want to do this differently, but I don't know how."

They're everywhere.

In every school I walk into.

Every family I work with.

Every room I speak in.

The Cost of Silence

Let's stop Pete's story for just a moment because I want to talk to you about what the research tells us about the cost of *not* having this conversation.

I think sometimes parents underestimate it.

They think:

"They'll figure it out."

Or:

"School will do it."

Or, most commonly:

"They're too young. There's plenty of time."

And I understand all of those thoughts. Genuinely.

But the evidence tells a different story.

Let's start with where young people are getting their information.

Research by Brook, one of the UK's leading sexual health charities, consistently finds that a significant proportion of young people in the UK report that the internet is their primary source of information about sex and relationships.

Not parents.

Not schools.

The internet.

Which means, in many cases, pornography.

I'm not telling you this to scare you.

This is an open and honest conversation, and you need to know what's happening with our young people.

These sites are built for adult entertainment, not adolescent education.

Sites that show sex without consent.

Without communication.

Without any of the things that make sex healthy, safe, and mutual.

The Sex Education Forum's Young People's RSE Poll found that many young people feel their sex and relationships education—both at home and at school—leaves them unprepared for the realities they encounter.

They want more.

They want honesty.

And they want someone to talk to them like a real person about real things.

If we look at the Ofsted Review published in 2021, the findings were sobering.

Sexual harassment among young people, including online harassment, was found to be normalised in many school environments.

Young people reported that it was so common they didn't bother reporting it anymore.

So routine that they had stopped seeing it as something worth naming.

How does something become normalised?

Gradually.

Quietly.

And in the absence of conversations that say:

"This is not okay."

"This is what okay looks like."

"And you have the right to name it when it isn't."

That is the cost of silence.

I'm going to bring in something from Dr John Bancroft's research on human sexuality.

Bancroft is one of the world's leading researchers in sexual development, and he makes a point that I want every parent to hear.

I know some of you listening have very young children.

You might be thinking:

"I don't really need this yet. I've got years."

I'm telling you now so you're forewarned and forearmed.

So you can have these conversations without carrying unnecessary embarrassment.

All right—maybe a little embarrassment.

But irrespective of your child's age, these conversations matter.

Even if your child is a teenager.

Even if your teenager has already left for university.

It's never, ever too late.

Shame Is Learned

Bancroft argues that shame around sexuality is not innate.

We're not born with it.

Children are not born embarrassed about their bodies.

They are not born ashamed of their developing sexuality.

Shame is transmitted.

It's learned.

It's passed down through the exact kind of silence, discomfort, and subject-changing that well-meaning adults engage in every single day.

When a child asks a question about bodies and the adult in the room goes red or changes the subject, the child does not learn nothing.

They learn something.

They learn:

"This is shameful."

"This is not something we talk about."

"This is a part of me that is too much, too embarrassing, or too wrong to say out loud."

And that lesson is learned early.

Repeated often.

And carried into adulthood.

Into relationships.

Into their sense of their own body.

Into their ability to say:

"This is what I want."

"This is what I don't want."

"This is okay."

"This isn't okay."

The silence is never neutral.

It teaches them something.

The question is:

What?

Language Is Protection

There is also the NSPCC's research and their Talk PANTS campaign, which is a brilliant campaign by the way.

We'll put links in the show notes because it's absolutely worth looking at.

My early career was spent working with children and young people, and I became a bit of an anomaly because there weren't many people specialising in this area at the time.

I worked extensively with cases involving sexual abuse.

I was trained to do that work, and because there were so few specialists available, it became a significant part of my caseload.

The NSPCC campaign is excellent because it is built on evidence about what protects children from abuse.

The research shows clearly that children who have been given the language and permission to talk about their bodies—who know the correct anatomical names and who have been taught that their body belongs to them—are significantly better equipped to recognise and report abuse than children who have not.

Language is protection.

I have known a young person—I'm pausing because I want to make sure there are no identifying details—but I have known a very young child whose knowledge of the correct anatomical names for their body parts likely prevented abuse from happening.

You might wonder why.

Because if that child reports something, there is no confusion.

No ambiguity.

No uncertainty.

Teachers understand.

Police understand.

Trusted adults understand.

And they are more likely to be believed because they can clearly describe what happened.

I genuinely believe that language protected that child.

Language is protection.

This conversation isn't just about sex education.

It's about safeguarding.

It's about giving our children the words they need if something ever goes wrong.

And that conversation starts much earlier than most parents think.

Much earlier.

How to Start Even When You Don't Know Where to Begin

Let's move into something practical.

Because I'm not going to leave you with the research and no way forward.

That's not how we do things here.

Here are five ways to start, even if you feel completely unprepared.

1. Start Before You're Ready

There is no perfect moment.

There is no magical age at which these conversations suddenly become easy.

The parents I see doing this well aren't the ones who waited until they felt confident.

They're the ones who started awkwardly.

Imperfectly.

A little bit red-faced.

And kept going.

Starting is the thing.

The rest follows.

2. Use the Correct Words From the Beginning

Brace yourselves.

Penis.

Vulva.

Vagina.

Testicles.

I know.

I know those words can feel uncomfortable.

But the research from the NSPCC and many others is very clear.

Children who know the correct anatomical names for their body parts have better safeguarding outcomes.

They are better able to report concerns.

And they carry less shame.

The awkwardness you feel belongs to you.

It doesn't belong to them.

Children will follow your lead.

And imagine how wonderful it would be if our children became the first generation to break that stigma.

If they—and eventually their children—could use the correct anatomical names without embarrassment.

Simply because that's normal.

In some countries it already is.

In the UK?

We're still catching up.

3. Normalise the Conversation

The talk is not one huge terrifying conversation.

It's hundreds of tiny ones.

The best sex and relationships education happens:

- In the car
- At the breakfast table
- During the adverts
- Walking the dog
- While cooking tea

Small.

Casual.

Ongoing.

Questions like:

"Did anything come up in school about that today?"

"I read something interesting."

"I listened to a podcast."

Keep the channel open.

That matters far more than getting any one conversation perfectly right.

4. Tell Them What You Didn't Get

This is surprisingly powerful.

You can say:

"Nobody talked to me about this when I was your age."

"I think that was a shame."

"So I'm trying to do it differently."

Young people respond to honesty.

They respond to vulnerability.

To a parent saying:

"I'm doing my best with something nobody ever showed me how to do."

It doesn't undermine your authority.

It builds trust.

And we know that from the research.

5. Know What's Coming and Use It

Over the next several weeks, we're going to cover all of it.

Puberty for boys.

Puberty for girls.

Periods.

Consent.

Sex.

The whole thing.

For you as parents.

And then in a separate set of episodes directly for your young people.

You can listen first.

You can share the episodes.

You can use them as a conversation starter.

That's exactly what they're there for.

You don't have to do this alone.

That's the point.

Back to Pete

Let's go back to Pete's story.

We spent a few sessions talking through what had held him back.

And what emerged, slowly—as it always does when you start to really look at these things—was a picture that will probably feel familiar to many of you.

Pete had grown up in a house where bodies were not discussed.

Where the word *sex* was never spoken at the dinner table.

Or anywhere else.

Where puberty happened without a single conversation to accompany it.

Just a body changing in bewildering and occasionally mortifying ways.

With no adult acknowledging what was happening.

He hadn't realised how much that had cost him until he found himself sitting opposite me trying to figure out how to talk to his ten-year-old son.

He said:

"I didn't have the words. So how do I give him the words I never had?"

And I said:

"You'll find them."

"You'll look them up."

"You'll practise saying them out loud in the car before you get home."

"And you'll say: 'I want to talk to you about something.'"

"It might feel awkward, and that's okay."

"It just means this is important."

Pete looked at me like that was a genuinely new idea.

"You can just say that?"

"You can just say that?"

Yes, Pete.

You can just say that.

Pete Opens the Door

A few weeks later, Pete came back to see me and told me about a conversation he'd started with his son on the way home from football.

He turned the radio down and just started.

Awkwardly.

There was even a slightly wrong word in the middle of it, which made his son giggle.

And actually, Pete said, that made the whole thing easier.

Less like a lecture.

More like two people trying to figure something out together.

He didn't cover everything.

In fact, he said he hadn't covered most of it.

But he'd opened the door.

And his son, at ten years old, had walked straight through it with the ease that children often do when adults make it safe.

As they pulled onto the drive, his son turned to him and said:

"Dad, can we talk more about that stuff sometime?"

Pete said he had to sit in the car for a minute before he went inside.

"Nobody had ever asked me that," he said.

"Not once."

"And he just asked it as if it was easy."

That is what happens when we open the door.

Children walk through it.

They've been waiting for us to open it.

They need to know it's safe.

The Bigger Picture

Let's zoom out for a moment because I want to talk about why this feels so important to me personally.

We are living through a period in history where young people's access to sexual content online—often unsolicited and frequently extreme—is unprecedented.

The average age of first exposure to online pornography in the UK is estimated to be around eleven years old.

Eleven.

Before most parents have had a single conversation.

Before most schools have covered much more than basic biology.

And the research is clear about what unsupported early exposure can do.

It shapes expectations.

It normalises behaviours that are not normal.

And, in the absence of anything to challenge it, it teaches young people that sex is something that happens *to* people rather than something that happens *with* people.

It teaches that bodies are objects.

That consent is an afterthought.

That communication doesn't matter.

The antidote to that isn't simply more restriction, although sensible restrictions absolutely have a role.

The antidote is information.

Language.

Relationship.

A trusted adult who says:

"Let me tell you what healthy looks like."

So that when young people encounter something that isn't healthy, they recognise it.

The Internet Watch Foundation, which works to remove child sexual abuse material from the internet, is clear in its guidance.

One of the most protective things adults can do is talk.

Not simply block and hope.

Talk.

The PSHE Association, which supports schools in delivering personal, social, health and economic education, makes exactly the same point.

Young people who navigate adolescence with the greatest confidence and the fewest harms are those who have ongoing, age-appropriate conversations with trusted adults about:

- Their bodies
- Relationships
- Boundaries
- Consent
- Sex

Not one conversation.

Ongoing conversations.

This isn't about being a cool parent.

It's not about oversharing.

It's not about removing mystery.

And it's certainly not about having conversations your child isn't ready for.

It's about being the adult in the room.

The one who names things.

The one who answers questions.

The one who makes it safe to ask.

This is what Pete became for his son on the way home from football.

Not an expert.

Not a textbook.

Just an adult willing to start.

What's Coming Next

Let me finish this first episode by telling you exactly what's coming and what this season is for.

Over the next several weeks, we're going to be talking about puberty.

What's happening in boys' bodies.

What boys need to hear about it.

And the same for girls.

We're going to be talking about periods.

We've got a very special guest joining us who has written a fantastic book, and I genuinely cannot wait to share that conversation with you.

We're going to talk about consent.

What it is.

When we start teaching it.

And why starting at three years old is not too early.

I know.

Three.

And we're going to talk about sex.

Honestly.

Accurately.

And without shame.

If you're listening to this right now and can feel yourself getting uncomfortable...

If you can feel yourself squirming a little...

These episodes are for you.

They're designed to give you the knowledge, the language, and the confidence to have these conversations in your own home.

Then, in the second half of the season, we're going to do something we've never done before.

We're going to create a series of episodes addressed directly to young people.

They'll be shorter.

Different in tone.

More like a trusted older voice speaking directly to them.

Every episode will carry clear age guidance at the start, so you'll know exactly what it's appropriate for before sharing it.

They'll be safe to play in the car.

Safe to listen to together.

Or safe to quietly send with a simple:

"I thought you might like this."

Because the goal of all of this—every episode, every conversation, every piece of information—is the same thing you hear us talk about all the time at The Resilient Kid.

To make sure no young person has to figure this out alone.

An Open Door

Pete's son asked if they could talk about it again.

That's the thing.

That's the whole thing for me.

That's what we're trying to build.

Not a perfect conversation.

An open door.

This season, we're going to open that door together.

Closing

Thank you for being here for this special season.

If this episode resonated with you, please share it with a parent, a carer, a teacher, or anyone who is standing at that door and not quite sure how to open it.

All of the research, references, resources, and further reading mentioned throughout this episode can be found in the show notes below.

And if you'd like to know when the next episode lands, subscribe wherever you get your podcasts so you don't miss a thing.

It's usually a Thursday.

Until next time, take a breath.

We've got you.

We're going to walk this one together.