



The Family Conversation Starter Guide

Scripts for the hardest conversations with a nine-year-old.

BY PAX EMBER

paxember.com

WELCOME

You're here before the hard moment. That alone tells me something.

Most parents wait until a hard conversation has already gone sideways before they figure out how to have it. You didn't.

This isn't a therapy manual. It's a working kit. The five rules, the scripts, the one phrase that changes everything, the weekly check-in template. Short on purpose. Built to be printed, marked up, and kept within reach when you need it at seven on a Tuesday night.

Nine is a sweet spot. Old enough to have real feelings about friends, fairness, money, and their own changing body. Young enough that the door is still wide open, and they still want you on the other side of it. The habits you build now are the ones that carry you through the harder years coming.

You don't need to become a conversation expert. You need to know four things.

1. The five rules that make hard conversations possible
2. The scripts for the hardest specific topics
3. What not to say
4. The rhythm that keeps the conversation going

That's what's in here. Nothing more, nothing less.

Let's begin.

Pax Ember

hello@paxember.com



SECTION ONE

Five Rules for Hard Conversations

Before the scripts, these rules. Every script in this guide assumes you already know these.

The Five Rules

1. You are not fixing. You are staying.

The instinct in a hard conversation is to solve. To explain why they shouldn't feel that way. To offer options. To reassure. Don't. Staying is the move. Your kid needs to feel you in the room with them before they can hear anything else. "That sounds really hard" buys you more than "here's what I think you should do."

2. The first thing they say is never the real thing.

Nine-year-olds are translating big feelings into the small set of words they have. When they say "nobody played with me at recess," the real thing underneath is often "I'm scared I don't have a real friend." Give it a few minutes. The first minute is the surface. The quiet bit in the middle is them deciding whether to trust you with more. Then comes the real thing.

3. Silence is not empty.

When your kid goes quiet, don't rush to fill the space. They are thinking. The pause is where they figure out what they actually believe. If you pick it up for them, they learn to wait for you. If you let them sit with the silence, they learn to find their own words.

4. Body language first. Vocabulary second.

A kid who feels judged closes down. Your face, your shoulders, your phone, all of that tells them whether this is safe before you say anything. Put the phone away. Sit at their level. Uncross your arms. Look at something else sometimes so the eye contact isn't a pressure test. Make the room safe, then talk.

5. End on connection, not resolution.

You don't have to solve the thing in this conversation. Most hard conversations are not one-offs. They are the first of many. End with "I'm glad we talked. Come back if you want to talk about it again." Not "so we're good?" The first ends the conversation well. The second pressures them to perform agreement.



SECTION TWO

Scripts for the Hardest Topics

The five topics below are the ones parents tell me they dread.
Each script is a way in, not a script to follow word-for-word.
Adapt to your kid. Keep the spirit.

SCRIPT

Bodies and changes

WHEN IT COMES UP

- They mention a body change, theirs or a classmate's, that surprised or embarrassed them
- Something they heard at school you want them to have honest context for
- You notice they are starting to feel shy about their body
- You want them to know the door is open before the changes really start

THE SCRIPT

"I want to talk about something that can feel a little awkward, and I want you to know you can always ask me about it. Bodies start to change somewhere between about nine and fourteen, and everybody's clock is a bit different. Some of it might feel confusing or weird, and that's normal. I won't pretend I remember every detail of being your age, but I'll always tell you the truth as best I know it. And if I don't know something, I'll say so and we'll find out together."

WHAT NOT TO SAY

- ✗ "It's totally natural, nothing to be embarrassed about!" (dismisses their actual feeling)
- ✗ "When I was your age..." (centers you, not them)
- ✗ "Do you have any questions?" (put on the spot, they'll say no)

THE ONE MOVE

Bring the topic up during something else. A car ride. A walk. Not a dedicated Sit Down Conversation. At nine, the side angle matters even more. It lets them answer without feeling examined.

SCRIPT

Money

WHEN IT COMES UP

- They ask for something that costs a lot
- They compare what your family has to a friend's
- You want to teach them about saving without it becoming a lecture
- They've been given some money and don't know what to do with it

THE SCRIPT

“Money is a tool. It’s not good or bad. It does what you tell it to do. Any time money shows up, you’ve got three choices. Save some. Spend some. Share some. You don’t have to pick just one. Here’s the fun part: if there’s something you really want, we can make a saving goal and color it in as it grows. Watching it fill up is the best part. Let’s figure out what you want this dollar to do.”

WHAT NOT TO SAY

- ✗ “We can't afford that.” (even when true, it stops the conversation)
- ✗ “You don't need that.” (it's not about need, it's about choice)
- ✗ “When you're older you'll understand.” (condescending)

THE ONE MOVE

Give them real decision-making power over a small real amount. A few dollars. Let them choose wrong. Then ask at the end of the week what they'd do differently. At nine, a small money mistake is one of the cheapest, most useful lessons available. The skill is built from doing, not hearing.

SCRIPT

Friendship drama

WHEN IT COMES UP

- They come home upset about who said what at recess
- A friend group is shifting and they're worried about their spot in it
- They did something to a friend and feel guilty
- Someone did something to them and they don't know what to do

THE SCRIPT

"Tell me what happened. Just the facts first, then how you felt. I'm not going to fix this. I just want to understand it with you." Then, after listening, only if they ask: "Do you want my advice, or do you want me to just listen?"

WHAT NOT TO SAY

- ✗ "Just ignore them." (dismisses their experience)
- ✗ "You should tell a teacher." (takes the decision away from them)
- ✗ "Don't worry about it, they'll forget by tomorrow." (might be true, doesn't help them process)

THE ONE MOVE

Ask them what their friend might have been feeling. Imagining someone else's inside world is the skill that grows real friendship. Not "were they being mean?" but "what do you think was going on for them?"

SCRIPT

Mistakes and apologies

WHEN IT COMES UP

- They did something they know was wrong
- They said something that hurt someone
- They broke a rule and got caught
- They owe an apology and don't know how to give one

THE SCRIPT

“A real apology has three parts. What you did. Why it was wrong. What you're going to do differently. No 'I'm sorry if' and no 'I'm sorry but.' Just the three parts. Want to practice it together first?”

WHAT NOT TO SAY

- ✗ “It's okay, everyone makes mistakes.” (lets them off the hook before they've owned it)
- ✗ “What were you thinking?” (they weren't, and this just shames them)
- ✗ “I'm disappointed in you.” (crushing, and it rarely helps)

THE ONE MOVE

Teach them that the other person might not forgive them right away, and that's okay. Their job is to apologize well, not to control how the other person reacts. Giving a nine-year-old that permission takes a huge weight off them.

SCRIPT

Feelings when they shut down

WHEN IT COMES UP

- They say "I'm fine" when they're clearly not
- They've gone quiet and won't say why
- They stomp off and slam a door
- They're crying and can't or won't explain

THE SCRIPT

Sit down near them. Not in front of them. Near. "I don't need you to talk. I just wanted you to know I'm here." Then wait. Don't fill the silence. Two minutes. Five minutes. Sometimes ten.

WHAT NOT TO SAY

- ✗ "Come on, just tell me what's wrong." (pressure)
- ✗ "You're being dramatic." (contempt)
- ✗ "I can't help you if you won't talk to me." (guilt trip)

THE ONE MOVE

Nine-year-olds often shut down because they don't have the words yet, not because they're hiding something. The words show up in their own time. Your job is to be the person who was willing to sit through the quiet until they came.



SECTION THREE

What Not to Say

Every one of these phrases feels helpful. Every one of these phrases shuts your kid down.

Ten phrases to retire

1. “You’re fine.” They decide if they’re fine, not you.
2. “I don’t want to hear it.” Tells them their feelings are a burden.
3. “Because I said so.” Closes a conversation that might have taught them something.
4. “You’re too sensitive.” Turns a feeling into a character flaw.
5. “Stop crying.” Crying is how a nine-year-old’s body settles itself, not a problem to switch off.
6. “I’m disappointed in you.” Lands as a verdict on them, not their action.
7. “Why can’t you be more like...” Comparisons damage how they see themselves for years.
8. “When I was your age...” Your childhood isn’t a useful template. Theirs is different.
9. “You should know better.” At nine, they often don’t yet. Teaching is the job.
10. “We’ll talk about it later.” If you say this, actually do it. If you don’t, they learn you won’t.

THE REPLACEMENT FOR ALL OF THEM

“Tell me more.”

It works everywhere. It buys you time to think. It tells them you're paying attention. It keeps the door open.



SECTION FOUR

The Rhythm That Keeps the Conversation Going

The scripts in this guide are one-time tools. The habit that makes them work is this.

The weekly family check-in

Fifteen minutes. One night a week. Same night every week. No phones, no TV, no multitasking.

The three questions:

1. “What was the best part of your week?”

Starts positive. Gives them momentum.

2. “What was the hardest part?”

Names that hard things happen. Makes it normal to say them out loud.

3. “Is there anything you wanted to tell me this week and didn’t?”

This is the one. Some weeks they'll say no. Some weeks, gold.

Your job is to listen without fixing. Theirs is to talk without performing.

The weekly check-in template

Print this. Use it every week for four weeks to build the habit. Then you won't need it anymore.

WEEK OF

KID'S BEST PART OF THE WEEK

KID'S HARDEST PART OF THE WEEK

WHAT THEY ALMOST DIDN'T TELL US

PARENT'S BEST PART

ONE THING WE WANT TO DO TOGETHER THIS COMING WEEK



What comes next

This guide is a starting point. Here's what actually matters going forward.

You don't need to get this perfect. You need to keep showing up. The parents who do this well aren't the ones with the best scripts. They're the ones whose kids know, deep down, that the door is always open.

Revisit the scripts when you need them. Different seasons of childhood bring different hard conversations. What you need at nine is not what you'll need at twelve.

If you want more, three places to go:

→ **Your Real Life Toolkit** at paxember.com/reallife/age9. Printable worksheets and parent guides for the ten skill areas in the book.

→ **Welcome to Real Life (Age 9 Edition)** is the workbook this guide is drawn from. paxember.com/books

→ **Reply to any email from me** at hello@paxember.com. I read them. It's a small list, and I like keeping it that way.

Thank you for showing up. That's the whole thing.

Pax Ember

hello@paxember.com | paxember.com