

How to Talk to Your Children About the Coronavirus (COVID-19)*

Managing Family Communications and Supporting Children in Uncertain Times

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How Can I Talk to My Child About the Coronavirus?

Talking to your children about the coronavirus depends on their age and developmental needs.

Infants and toddlers (under age 3)

Infants and toddlers may not have a language-based understanding of the coronavirus itself, but they can sense if a caregiver is worried, sad, or upset. Children this age cannot describe their feelings using words. Instead they may be more fussy than usual, or show changes in their sleep or feeding patterns.

- Maintain routines and consistency in caregivers and their environment. This provides a sense of familiarity and security.
- Offer more physical comfort and soothing.

Preschoolers (3 - 5 years)

Preschoolers usually understand basic ideas about germs and being sick.

- Provide brief factual explanations.
- Maintain routines and focus on hygiene behaviors (e.g., washing hands while counting to 20, singing “Happy Birthday” twice through). This can help your child feel a sense of control.
- Limit and monitor television and online sources of information.
- Encourage normal play and reading. Preschoolers often use play to understand and organize their feelings.
- Let your child know you are there to keep them safe.
- Offer more physical comfort and soothing.

School age children (ages 6-12)

School-aged children are likely to have more questions.

- Keep explanations simple and factual.
- Give children opportunities to explore their feelings and ask questions.
- Reassure your child that you and their school are doing what is best to keep them safe.
- Supervise television and media use. Be available to answer questions that come up from watching television or seeing information online.

Adolescents (age 13 or older)

Adolescents (teens and young adults) can understand information much like adults. They might get information through school, friends, social media, online sources, or television. They may also be more likely to seek other sources of information or support, such as from their peers, rather than parents. Sometimes, these other sources are not accurate.

- Focus on listening to your child. Invite them to join you in watching and discussing news or online information about the coronavirus.
- Discuss the facts with your child. They will benefit from your emotional support and with setting healthy limits related to media and internet use.

*These are broad recommendations based on questions commonly asked by parents. They are not intended to be comprehensive, and do not replace medical advice or public health guidance. If you or your child are concerned about COVID-19 infection or exposure, speak to your primary care provider about testing and additional precautions for your family. You may also benefit from additional mental health support and guidance. Ask your primary care providers for mental health referrals.

What Else Can I Do As A Parent?

Pay attention to your child's emotions and explore their questions.

- Start by asking your child what they have heard, how they are feeling, and explore what questions they have. Children may have questions that are quite specific to them. For instance, younger children are more likely to have questions about changes to their own family's plans, such as canceled birthday parties or trips. They might also have questions such as what germs are and why handwashing is important.
- Provide facts using age-appropriate words, followed by reassurance. Experiencing unexplained changes to routines or uncertainty can be confusing and increase worries. For instance, with young school-aged children, you might say: "We are learning about this new germ/ virus so scientists can make the right medicine for it."

Provide realistic assurance and find healthy ways to cope

- Validate your children's feelings or concerns.
- Provide realistic assurance. For instance, "Doctors are telling us the best way to stay healthy is by washing our hands often and by catching your cough in your elbow or a tissue." With older children, you might say, "Scientists and doctors are working to help us learn more about this special virus. This virus usually does not make kids very sick, but it can make some grown-ups very sick."
- Engage in positive activities with your child to cope with challenging emotions. This can include reading together, playing, or being physically active. Consider creative ways of staying in touch with friends and family, while practicing social distancing. This can include phone or video calls, making cards and writing emails or letters. This helps children stay emotionally connected to the people they care about.

Balance flexibility with maintaining routines.

- Even though you may need to be flexible and make changes in work or school schedules, try to maintain normal routines and prioritize family time (such as homework or family meal times) as much as possible. Familiar routines and predictability help children feel that life is going on as normal. This can help them feel safe and secure when other aspects of life feel out of control or unpredictable.
- Allow flexibility in your own routine. Children may need extra attention at this time.

If your child has pre-existing medical conditions, it is important that you consult with your child's primary care provider about additional precautions for your child. Speak to your child about information specific to them.

Manage media and internet exposure: Stay informed without getting overwhelmed.

- Ask your children about what they have heard and help them understand the information. Children who use social media or have online access, and young children with older siblings, are likely to hear a lot of information. Some of that information may not be accurate. Clarify misunderstandings and remind them of the things they and your family can do to be safe.
- Set healthy limits with media and internet use. Discuss the importance of getting information from trusted sources. Identify age-appropriate sources, such as parents, school teachers, or specific websites.
- Talk to children about the fact that focusing too much on media and online information may not be helpful and can cause more anxiety. Finding ways to balance being safe and relaxed are both important.

- Model healthy habits for your children by placing appropriate limits around media and television use. You can also provide other healthy choices, like watching a favorite family movie together.

Explore how your child is responding to information and changes within your own community.

- Consider the age and personality of each of your children, as well as information from their schools and local public health sources. Siblings may also differ in their reactions. You may notice your children's moods and behaviors are different than usual.
- Ask what information is being shared in school and explore how *your* children are responding to it. Some children may respond with more anxiety than others. Experiencing these extra worries can affect how they are thinking and feeling.

Help your children avoid blame and stereotyping.

- Talk to your children about what they may have heard from friends or at school. Help them understand that people may cope with their own worry by blaming others. However, this can have many unintended negative consequences *for everyone*. For instance, people may be less likely to mention symptoms or seek help if they fear being bullied or judged for being sick.

Take care of yourself so you can support your child

- Give yourself time to think about if, and how, you want to share information about the coronavirus with your child. Talk to family members or other adults you trust.
- Pay attention to how you cope with and respond to news about the coronavirus. Children often learn how to respond to stressful situations from adults. Paying attention to your own emotions can help you figure out when and how you to take care of yourself.

Resources and Helplines

Partners HealthCare COVID-19 Hotline (open to the public): 617-724-7000
SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline: 1-800-985-5990

Sources Referenced for this Handout

MGH Parenting At a Challenging Time Resources

[Community Crises and Disasters: A Parent's Guide to Talking with Children of All Ages](#)

SAMHSA

[Coping with Stress During Infectious Disease Outbreaks](#)

[Talking With Children: Tips for Caregivers, Parents, and Teachers During Infectious Disease Outbreaks](#)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

[Talking with children about Coronavirus Disease 2019: Messages for parents, school staff, and others working with children](#)

[Frequently Asked Questions and Answers: Coronavirus Disease-2019 \(COVID-19\) and Children Get Your Household Ready for Coronavirus Disease 2019](#)

National Association of School Psychologists

[Talking to Children About COVID-19 \(Coronavirus\): A Parent Resource](#)