

Five Tips to Navigate COVID-19 With Your Kids Without Fueling Their Anxiety

Forced school closings. Quarantines. Daily death tolls. Pandemic. These are big scary words populating news headlines every day regarding COVID-19. Many parents are trying to enforce healthy habits to keep their family safe without fueling their children's fear and anxiety. Below are five tips to help you navigate the coronavirus with your children and family.

1. **MODEL CALM:** The number one thing you can do during the COVID-19 outbreak is to stay calm and logical. Children are great observers of our actions, especially in times of stress, and they take our lead on how to act and react. If you let the fear of the ever-changing pandemic hijack your brain, your logical thinking will check out as your emotions take over, limiting your ability to effectively communicate important information with your family. If your children sense that you are freaking out, anxious, or fearful, they will pick that up and follow your lead.
 - [Check out this video](#) to understand the difference between your logical and emotional/fear brain. To stay logical, use stress management strategies such as taking deep-belly breaths, or exercise breaks (even just 10 push-ups), doing yoga, journaling, or getting outside in nature. Do whatever you can to model calm and planned over panic.
2. **LIMIT MEDIA:** It is proven that our thoughts become part of our DNA, and the quantity of fear thoughts that you put into your brain about the coronavirus have a direct impact on your stress level. If you are keeping CNN on 24/7 for every breaking news update, not only will your thoughts about the coronavirus be more fearful, but you will unknowingly increase the cortisol and adrenaline in your system, and therefore, increase your stress. The good news is that you can choose what thoughts you focus on by limiting your media intake and not filling your brain with the constant stream of updates.
 - You should be your children's best source of information about the coronavirus as the situation evolves. Encourage them to come to you with their questions instead of listening to sensationalized fear videos or friends who may be escalating the situation.
 - Stay up to date once a day by checking the [coronavirus CDC website](#) so that you are informed and safe.
 - Stick to the facts and what they need to know to manage their safe behaviors without providing too much information too often.
3. **TALK ABOUT HYGIENE:** Best practice from the CDC is to adopt these new habits: washing hands frequently, covering your cough with an elbow, not touching your face, and keeping an appropriate distance from friends and family members during this pandemic. These new rules have to be non-negotiable. It is critical that you introduce these preventive steps to your children in a way that will help you avoid power struggles and arguments in times of stress. Your children are more likely to get onboard with these new rules if you:
 - First set a time and place to talk in a serious way about your plans. Try to refrain from yelling at them to wash for 20 seconds or minimizing by just sending a text. Have a planned conversation.
 - When you sit down as a family, calmly explain how important these national rules are for everyone, detailing why it is vital for them to do their part to stay healthy and stop the spread. Keep it short and direct. Don't over or under explain. Lead your kids and stick to the facts you know.
 - Involve everyone in generating ideas to create fun new routines and reminders to help everyone comply with new rules, like using this [handwashing app](#) to remember when and how long and often to wash their hands, or perhaps make up a silly song about not touching their faces, or change their screensavers to the four COVID-19 rules.
4. **PROCESS FEELINGS AND FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL:** You will likely be having more forced family time at home as events, work, and school get canceled. They may be disappointed about missing planned events that they have been looking forward to all year, and it is important to validate their feelings of loss or

sadness. However, it is not helpful to complain and worry about the uncontrollable length or frequency of the quarantines. Let your children process their feelings, provide empathy and comfort, and then help them move on by focusing on what they can control by planning something fun to do together.

- Pull out a deck of cards, board games, or art projects and play!
- Watch old family videos or go through photos; make new memories by looking at old ones.
- Replace friend sleepovers with family sleepovers, binge-watch a series and make popcorn.

You will always remember this major event, just like we remember other national events, so try your best to create some good memories in the face of the difficult emotions. Control what you can control, which is how you make the most of family time.

5. **STAY IN THE PRESENT MOMENT:** When there is something as big as a pandemic, it is easy to go down the “what-if” rabbit hole, which fuels our panic and fear. Staying in the present moment is an important calm strategy, but this takes extra intention and practice in stressful times. Healthy distractions like reading a book, singing, playing a game, or practicing gratitude are ways to ground yourself and your family in the here and now. If your children are caught in the “what-if” future coronavirus spiral, teach them this easy grounding mindfulness strategy called 54321:

- Ask them to name 5 things they see, then 4 things they feel with their body, then 3 things they hear, next 2 things they smell, and, finally, 1 thing they taste. Then repeat.
- This is a simple strategy to help them focus on what is right in front of them, get out of a spiral of panic thoughts about the future and come back to the present moment. Hey--it may help you as well.

Remember this too shall pass. Try your best to stay calm, informed, and prepared. And at any time, if you or your child are having trouble with distress management or panic, reach out to a school counselor or therapist, or call [National Alliance on Mental Illness \(NAMI\) Helpline](https://www.namihelpline.org/): 1-800-950-NAMI (6264)