

DISCUSSING CORONAVIRUS WITH YOUR CHILDREN

Like any tough subject, Coronavirus (COVID-19) can be challenging for parents to talk about with their children. It is natural to want to “protect” children from unpleasant information. However, young children, even infants and toddlers, pick up on emotional changes in the family, and at times assume the worst. Most children have questions

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they need answered. When talking with children about coronavirus, parents should find a relaxed time and place, and provide sensitive and responsive caregiving while addressing their children’s questions and concerns. **When parents feel calm and clear in their own understanding, it is easier to be calm and clear when explaining tough topics to children.**

Goals of Speaking with Children About Coronavirus

- Provide basic information to help children understand what they may be seeing and hearing about the outbreak, and help them make sense of the changes happening in their families, schools and neighborhoods.
- Develop a “shared understanding” within the family about coronavirus, what it is and is not, remembering that younger children are likely to look to their parents and siblings for guidance and reassurance.
- Reassure children that if anyone in their family becomes sick, they will receive the medical care they need.
- Use developmentally-appropriate explanations tailored to your child’s age, verbal ability, and cognitive understanding.

Communicating with Children at Different Developmental Levels

- The amount, type, and complexity of information sharing is different depending on the age and developmental level of each child.
- Communication with infants and toddlers involves communicating safety and consistency through physical presence and touch, and by maintaining family routines and schedules.
- Preschool children (3-5 year olds) are less likely to understand and will have had minimal exposure to the news. Staying home, using physical distancing, and promoting hygiene can be described as fun activities for preschool children.

- School aged children (6-12 year olds) may have a basic understanding of what the virus is and understand it is dangerous, but they may not understand why changes in their routines are required. Assess their level of understanding, and then provide further explanations to avoid misconceptions and confusion. Be honest and direct when answering their questions.
- Adolescents and young adults (13 year olds +) have a broader understanding of coronavirus, but may not fully comprehend the severity of the situation. They are exposed to social media more frequently, and are therefore more likely to receive inaccurate information. Address misconceptions and ensure access to reliable sources for up-to-date information. Be honest and direct.

Opportunities/Activities To Engage Your Children *Preschool and early school-aged children:*

- Present home isolation as an adventure (e.g., a trip to Mars where their house is a spaceship and they cannot leave). Encourage children to keep a journal about their experiences.
- Encourage educational activities that promote home isolation as an opportunity to have “school at home.”
- Use drawings or dolls and figures to explain how germs can spread. These re-enactments can also be used to demonstrate the precautions needed to protect at-risk populations, such as older adults.
- Create games or sing songs that promote healthy hygiene habits around the household.

Continued

School-aged children and adolescents:

- Explain that children can help at-risk individuals (e.g., “Grandma and Grandpa”) stay healthy by staying at home, but should maintain their communication with them.
- Engage in family discussions to answer children’s questions and address their concerns.
- Promote connectivity with children’s peers through technology and the internet.

All ages:

- Promote activities that include the entire family, such as going on walks or watching movies that family members of all ages may enjoy.

For examples of specific language to use when explaining coronavirus to preschoolers, school-age children, and teenagers see the CSTS Fact Sheet “Finding the Right Words to Talk with Children and Teens about Coronavirus.”

https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_FS_Finding_Right_Words_Talk_Children_Teens_Coronavirus.pdf

Additional References:

CDC, Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID 19): Preparing Your Family.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/index.html>

CDC, Talking with children about Coronavirus Disease 2019: Messages for parents, school staff, and others working with children.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/talking-with-children.html>

Child Mind Institute. Talking to Kids About the Coronavirus.

<https://childmind.org/article/talking-to-kids-about-the-coronavirus/>

National Association of School Psychologists. Talking to Children About COVID-19 (Coronavirus): A Parent Resource.

[https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crisis-resources/talking-to-children-about-covid-19-\(coronavirus\)-a-parent-resource](https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crisis-resources/talking-to-children-about-covid-19-(coronavirus)-a-parent-resource)