

How can parents talk to children about COVID-19 and its impact? Managing family communications and supporting children in a time of uncertainty. *

Archana Basu, Ph.D.

Age-specific descriptions

- Infants and toddlers (<3 years), are unlikely to understand the implications of COVID-19. But they can understand when a caregiver is worried, sad, or upset. Children this age may not have words to describe their feelings but they may be more fussy than usual or show changes in their sleep or feeding patterns. Maintaining routines, and consistency in caregivers and environments is important because it provides a sense of security and safety. They may need more physical comforting and soothing than usual from their caregivers.
- Preschoolers (3 - 5 years) may understand basic ideas about germs and being sick. Maintaining routines and minimizing exposure to adult sources of information (television, online information) is important. Encouraging normal play and reading with children this age can be helpful because preschoolers' often use play to understand and organize their feelings. Offering brief explanations while focusing on prevention and practicing hygiene behaviors (e.g., counting or singing while hand washing) can help children feel a sense of control. Letting them know that you are there to keep them safe can help reduce fears or anxiety. Children this age may also need more physical comforting and reassurance.
- School age children (≥ 6 years) may have more questions. Keep your explanations simple and factual. Give them opportunities to explore their feelings and concerns, and provide appropriate assurances about your efforts (and the school's efforts) to keep them safe. Supervise television/internet use and be available to answer questions that arise from media exposure.
- Adolescents (≥ 13 years) can cognitively process information much like adults, and may get information through school, peers, social media/ online sources, or television. They may be more likely to seek alternate sources of information or support (e.g., peers) than parents, some of which may not be accurate. They will benefit from your emotional support, discussing the facts, and help with setting appropriate limits related to media and internet use. Focus on listening, and invite your adolescent children to join you in watching and discussing COVID related news, or in exploring online information together.

What can I do as a parent?: Overarching guidance.

- *Explore your child's specific questions and use age-appropriate language to help them understand information.*
 - Begin by asking your child what s/he knows 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 (e.g., canceled birthday parties or trips), and concrete questions such as what are germs, and why is hand washing important.
 - Experiencing unexplained changes to routines or uncertainty can be confusing and increase worries. Provide factual information, using age-appropriate terms (e.g., virus, germs, COVID-19), followed by reassurance. For instance, with young school-aged children, you might say: "We are learning about this new germ/ virus so that scientists can make the right medicine for it".
- *Provide realistic assurance and help children engage in positive coping.*
 - Validate your children's feelings or concerns, and provide realistic assurance. For instance, "Doctors are telling us that the best way to stay healthy is by washing our hands often" and "by catching your cough in your elbow (or by using a tissue)". With older children: "Scientists and doctors are working to help us learn more about this special virus". You may also consider telling them that "This virus usually does not make kids very sick, but it can make some grown-ups very sick." Explaining to children that practicing the recommended hygiene behaviors helps everyone stay safe can help them feel calm and in control.
 - Engage in positive active coping with your child. This can include reading together, playing, or being physically active. If you are limiting physical contact and social events, consider alternate ways of staying connected to friends and family through phone calls, video conferencing, or making cards and writing emails or letters. This helps children stay emotionally connected to the people they care about.
 - If your child has pre-existing medical conditions, please consult with their primary care provider about additional precautions for your child, and speak to your child about information specific to them.

* 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.

- *Balance flexibility with maintaining routines.*
 - Even though you may need to be flexible and responsive to accommodate changes in work or school schedules, try to maintain normal routines and prioritize family time (e.g., homework, family meal times) as much as possible. Familiar routines and predictability help children feel that life is going on as normal, which can help them feel safe and secure when other aspects of life feel out of control.
 - Allow flexibility in your own routine. Children may need extra attention at this time.
- *Manage media and internet access: staying informed without getting overwhelmed.*
 - Children who use social media or have online access, including young children with older siblings, are likely to hear a lot of information, some of which may not be accurate. Ask your children about what they have heard, and help them understand the information. Clarify misconceptions and remind them of the things they, and your family, can do to be safe such as hand washing, avoiding large groups of people, etc.
 - Set healthy limits with media/ internet use. For instance, you could discuss the importance of getting information from trusted sources and identify those age-appropriate sources (e.g., parents, school teachers, specific websites).
 - Talk to children about the fact that excessive focus on media and online information can be anxiety provoking and counterproductive. Finding ways to balance being safe and relaxed are both important.
 - Parents can model healthy limits to media and television use (and provide healthy alternatives 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, when talking to your children. For instance, ask about 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, and siblings may differ in their reactions. Anxiety can change how we evaluate information (e.g., we may overestimate or underestimate the risks or our ability to cope). You may notice that your children's mood and behaviors are different than usual because experiencing these extra worries can impact 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 disclose symptoms or seek help due to fears of being bullied or the stigma associated with being sick.
- *Parental self-care is central to supporting children.*
 - Information about the impact of COVID-19 is still emerging. Allow yourself time to consider whether you need to, and how you want to, share the information that you learn with your children. Have conversations with other caregivers (e.g., other parents, teachers).
 - Be mindful of your own coping style and emotional responses. Your emotional health impacts your children, so remember to take care of yourself.

References and Resources

Partners HealthCare COVID-19 Hotline: 617-724-7000

SAMHSA Distress Helpline: 1-800-985-5990

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](#)