

What to Say To Your Child About the Coronavirus -- and How To Cope As a Parent

1. When you talk with kids about a subject that's in the news, always begin by asking them what they've already heard.

That allows you to respond reassuringly to any fears your child is worrying about and correct rumors that aren't true.

Most children will have heard about the coronavirus, so you can just keep your tone simple and straightforward: *"Hey, what have you heard about the coronavirus?"*

Always start by listening. Don't say much, except to acknowledge your child's worries: *"Wow! That's a scary idea -- that everyone is dying of this virus. It must have frightened you to hear that."*

Then, matter of factly correct any misinformation: *"Happily, it's not true that everyone who gets the virus dies; in fact most people get something like a mild flu and recover quickly."*

(In fact, the World Health Organization (WHO) says that 92% of reported Covid-19 patients experience the symptoms usually associated with a cold or mild flu and fully recover within 6 to 14 days.)

2. Use discussions with your child to reassure and give age-appropriate information

so that they have a context for whatever they've heard. Your goal is to communicate that:

- You are safe.
- Grownups have got this covered.
- Children and grownups who are otherwise healthy have immune systems that are able to fight off this virus, so we won't notice it or we will just get something like the flu.
- Lots of smart and capable scientists and health workers are keeping the virus contained. We are lucky in this country to have an excellent health system.
- Our job now is to make sure that we don't unwittingly spread the virus, so it's more important than ever that we develop good health habits, like washing our hands so we don't transmit germs.

- If we can stay healthy, that reduces the spread of the virus and lets health care workers focus on helping others who are more vulnerable.
- There may be big changes such as school closings to stop the spread of the disease, and that's a good thing!
- We will be good citizens and stay home as much as we can -- so we are going to create a routine that works for us and enjoy our family during this temporary situation.

That's all a preschooler needs to know, and you can keep your explanation age-appropriate. School-age kids and preteens may have questions you can't answer, about pandemics and global spread. It's a terrific opportunity to teach kids about public health, being a good citizen, and compassion. It's fine to turn together to the internet for information, but choose responsible sources like the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), who will have a measured, non-alarmist approach.

With younger children, if you don't know the answer, tell them *"That's a good question. I'm not sure what the answer is. But let me find out for you!"* Then look it up without your child there, so you can frame your answer in a reassuring way, once you have the facts.

Remember that all humans find it hard to tolerate uncertainty. In fact, the unknown is terrifying to all of us, and so your child may well ask a lot of questions about what will happen. It's fine to say you don't know, but remember that underneath those questions is usually worry, so be sure to reassure your child that this virus is no match for the humans who are working to contain it.

If your child keeps asking the same anxious questions over and over, and you have already answered those questions as well as you can, empathize with how hard it is not to know what is going to happen. Then, ask your child what they could tell themselves at this moment to help them feel better. Help them shape that response so they can reassure themselves when they get worried. (For instance: *"My job is to wash my hands and not touch my face and enjoy being home from school. My parents' job is to keep our family healthy and they will do that. If I do get the virus, it will just be like any other flu. This is not an emergency for us."*)

3. Work out any worry you have about this BEFORE talking with your kids.

Your own attitude will always communicate itself to your child. Children take their cues from us. So don't let your children overhear you venting your own fears to other people.

Before you talk with your child about Covid-19, reassure yourself. If you feel panic, that means that your thoughts are telling you that this is an emergency. In fact, that's almost

certainly not true. Sure, your child may be home from school, and that is an unexpected challenge. But enforced family time is not a tragedy; you could see it as a positive opportunity. Your child is no less safe than he or she was last week. The chances of your family getting anything worse than the flu, even in this pandemic, are much less than the chances of a car accident, and you get into a car every day.

If you have a hard time believing this, it's a red flag that you've exposed yourself too intimately to the news. Every time you see more news about this issue, you're sending yourself into fight or flight mode. But this is highly unlikely to be an emergency for your family. It's our job as parents to manage our own thoughts and emotions so they don't adversely affect our children. So notice your thoughts, and correct them, to keep your own anxiety in check.

It's important to make sure your information sources are trustworthy. So, for instance, the [CDC](#), [WHO](#), and [Scientific American](#) can be counted on to be non-alarmist and helpful, but there are plenty of sources that are using this health challenge to create general fear. You're choosy about who you spend time with. Be choosy about who you let influence your mindset.

4. Turn off your TV.

Every time children hear that there was a death from the virus -- even if this is the same death they heard about yesterday -- it magnifies their fears. Children under the age of ten should never watch TV news, which is purposely designed to keep us engaged by scaring us. And research shows that even adults who watch TV news become more fearful.

5. Teach healthy habits.

Teach kids that this virus spreads when someone who is sick coughs or sneezes or even breathes. The germs in their body get transmitted by tiny respiratory droplets, that hang in the air and can live on skin, cloth and other surfaces. Those germs can only infect us if they get into our eyes, nose or mouths. Unfortunately, we humans touch our faces about two dozen times an hour, and half of the time we are touching our eyes, nose or mouth -- so if we have germs on our hands, they usually get into our bodies.

That's why it's so important to develop good health habits such as:

- Washing hands in hot soapy water for the length of two "Happy Birthday" songs to kill germs.

- Not touching our faces.
- Sneezing/coughing into our elbows.
- Using wipes to disinfect surfaces.
- Not sharing glasses and eating utensils.
- Staying home and distanced from others when we don't feel well.
- Staying hydrated to keep our immune systems healthy.
- Getting enough sleep to keep our immune systems in optimal condition. (Anyone who has to be awakened in the morning, whether by a parent or an alarm, is not going to bed early enough.)

6. Keep Your Own Anxiety In Check.

Hopefully you will be able to avoid taking your child into a store or on public transportation. But if you do need to do this, you'll probably be tempted to hiss at them to not touch anything. Unfortunately, that just makes kids more anxious, and more likely to want to touch things, just to manage their anxiety. Instead, simply start a new habit of everyone in your family wearing latex gloves and using alcohol wipes when you're out and about. Carry a ziplock bag with you for used wipes and gloves in case there's no trashcan handy. Take off shoes as you come in your door, and go straight to the sink to wash hands.

Be matter of fact about these habits -- the flu is not dangerous to your family but no one wants to suffer through the flu, and we need to avoid germs and not transmit them to people who might be more vulnerable.

If you buy some extra food staples and your child notices, be sure to explain that if someone in your family does get the flu, you will need to be good citizens and not go out until everyone is better, so as not to spread the virus. So you're just making sure that you have plenty of food on hand in case someone in your home does get sick.

It's natural to worry about your child touching their face, and it's fine to remind them not to, but keep a sense of humor about this, rather than a sense of alarm. This is a terrific opportunity to help your child develop good hygiene habits, but you don't want to make them anxious. Instead, enforce frequent hand-washing to kill the germs. (Make it fun to avoid power struggles.)

And of course, commiserate about how hard it is to keep your hands off your face. (Some researchers conjecture that all primates touch their face as a way to help them manage stress and emotion.) Keep count as a family about the impulses you feel to touch your face and how many of those times you are able to notice and stop yourself. Teach your kids workaround habits -- for instance, when they want to scratch an itch on their face, they can grab a tissue and use that.

Look at this as a good habit for all of us to develop, and share your ruefulness that habits can be hard to establish -- but most things worth doing take effort. We can do hard things, if we support each other!

7. Empower your child.



Research shows that when we feel frightened or sad in response to news, it's helpful to take some kind of positive action to make things better. That makes us feel less powerless and fearful, and it models for children how to be good citizens and caring people. So talk as a family about how you can make a contribution to keeping everyone healthy by staying healthy ourselves and by supporting health care professionals and people who are vulnerable. Your family might:

- Give allowance money (which you could match) to a Coronavirus Relief fund to help fight the virus in countries with less developed health care systems. For instance, [Global Giving](#) and [Doctors Without Borders](#) are getting supplies to patients and front-line medical responders in high-risk and quarantined areas.
- Make Thank You cards and Appreciation Kits for health care workers (Include chapstick, pens, water bottles, fun socks.)
- You could choose to remember everyone in the world who is struggling with this illness in your family grace and prayers.
- Let children contribute by helping wipe down surfaces and doorknobs at your home.
- Video chat with elderly family members or neighbours who may be isolated.
- Make it a fun challenge to find ways to make staying home fun and rewarding.

8. Be aware that your child might well be worried that you will die.

Children's anxieties often surface indirectly. Children who are afraid of losing you to death might "test" you by misbehaving to see if you love them enough not to abandon them. Children may develop sudden fears -- of being alone in a room, or left with a babysitter. They might have nightmares or wet the bed. They may "over-react" and have a meltdown about something that seems trivial to you, which allows them to let off stress by crying or raging.

So if your child starts acting out, remind yourself that this might be their way of acting out something they can't talk about -- their fear of losing you.

You can address this directly by saying *"You seem to be having a hard time lately. I know that some kids are worried about their parents, with this virus going around. I want you to know that I am taking very good care of myself. I wear hygienic gloves on the subway, to touch the atm machine, etc. I work hard not to touch my face so the virus can't infect me. I eat healthily so my immune system is in good shape. I expect to live until I am a very old person -- you will be all grown up and have children of your own and I will be their grandparent!"*

If your child is worried about their grandparent, neighbour or other elderly person, acknowledge that concern. *"Grandma is healthy right now. She is staying home and doing everything she can to make sure she isn't exposed to the virus. And we can help her stay cheerful by sending her our drawings and having video chats with her."*

And of course, the best way to help children work through fear of any kind is play and laughter. So if your child is misbehaving or seems stressed -- or simply as a good preventive maintenance daily habit -- initiate some roughhousing to get everyone laughing. Laughter changes the body chemistry, reducing stress hormones, and will help your child's fears melt away.

9. Make lemonade.



It's probable that your child's school will be cancelled or quarantines imposed. Even if that doesn't happen, health officials say that it's prudent to stay home as much as you can. Many parents react to this with panic, since we have to earn a living. But even beyond the economic stress, the idea of being cooped up endlessly with our children can be daunting.

And yet, most parents also say that they wish they had more time to spend as a family doing wholesome activities like cooking together or doing art or other family projects. Most parents know that one-on-one time with each child helps children thrive and cooperate, but struggle to squeeze that "special time" into their daily life. So if your family ends up spending more time at home together, why not look at this as an opportunity to strengthen and sweeten your family relationships?

First, set up some routines and structures that will help everyone live together without getting on each other's nerves, like enforced quiet time every day after lunch. Make sure your kids are involved in a fun way in any work that needs to be done, like laundry or cooking. Make time for learning, either with school assignments, reading or online programs. Be sure to schedule one on one time for each child with each parent. Include physical activity every day, like yoga and dance parties.

Your child will be reassured by routines during this time of uncertainty, but don't over-schedule. That may be reassuring to you, but your child will need a balance between structured expectations and downtime. Why? Because this is a stressful time for everyone, including your child. Children need unstructured play and creative outlets to work through stress and big emotions, so protect their downtime.

Finally, brainstorm to create a list of enjoyable things to do when you're housebound, some individually and some as a family. Think cooperative board games, painting projects, cooking together, roughhousing games like trying to take each other's socks off. Post your activity lists, put on some great music, and have a family dance party to welcome your Staycation together!

<https://www.ahaparenting.com/blog/talking-with-children-about-the-corona-virus>