

## ***Talking with Children about COVID-19.***

COVID-19 is in the news and on everyone's mind. Our children, unfortunately, are not likely an exception. Even when children are shielded from media, peers, siblings, and overheard conversations can give children just enough information to bring forth concern. Children are also incredibly intuitive to their family's emotions and will pick up on any fear and anxiety their parents or extended family may be feeling.

So, what is the best approach to sharing when it comes to children and coronavirus?

### **Shielding vs. Communicating**

With small children, shielding them from troubling information is ideal. Children in early childhood should be kept from the news if possible. This includes making an effort to talk about coronavirus only when they are not present and not exposing them to televised news. Children in young grades, such as first through third, would also ideally be shielded, but exposure to older children on playgrounds or siblings at home means this is less likely to be possible.

When it becomes apparent that the child has knowledge about the virus, then age-appropriate communication can begin, with the foremost focus being to help the child feel safe and more secure. It's important to communicate once you know a child has some, even very limited, knowledge of the virus to be sure that they do not awfulize the small amount of information they have in the absence of a parent giving age-appropriate guidance.

### **Listening and Tailoring Responses**

If you suspect your child knows about the virus, begin with an open-ended question about what they know and then actively and intently listen. Once their level of knowledge is known, follow up with a question about concerns and listen intently again. By keeping the conversation fluid and open, it will help to prevent oversharing on the parent's part and bringing more concerns to children than they may already have.

It's also important to note that adults have different needs for coping than children. While an adult may relieve anxiety by learning all they can or preparing their home for extended quarantine, children will not necessarily take comfort in these measures. Consider that children under twelve will have a primarily emotional response to the news and as such require lots of listening from parents and lots of reassurance.

While this reassurance can involve sharing encouraging data, it's essential to remember the real question behind the questions, whatever form may take is, "Am I safe? Is our family going to be okay? How can I feel more in control?" As such, answers need to ultimately address these concerns that lie behind questions, even if questions are detailed oriented such as talking transmission rates or talking points picked up from news or an older peer.

A key part of listening will be making sure, as a parent, that you are never dismissive of the child's fears, even if they seem irrational.

In The New York Times Parenting article [How to Talk to Kids About Coronavirus](#), Abi Gewirtz, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist, and professor at the University of Minnesota discusses this issue:

"If your child is afraid because some kid on the bus told him he might die, that's a real fear and you should take it seriously. If you simply tell the child, you'll be fine," they might not feel heard.

Listen to them and track what the child is feeling,” she said. “You can say something in a calm voice like, ‘That sounds pretty scary, I can see it in your face.’”

### **Empowerment and Control**

Fear of the unknown and anxiety of what’s to come can often be mitigated by empowerment.

In the [Time Magazine](#) article, [How to Talk to Your Kids about Coronavirus](#), Ellen Braaten, co-director of the Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds at Massachusetts General Hospital says there is benefit in reminding children of things that are in their power, like washing their hands and covering their sneezes and coughs to avoid getting and spreading illness. She says, “Knowing there’s something we can do makes us feel less powerless.”

[In this study](#) about empowering families and children during a healthcare crisis, experts recommend four areas of focus — choice, agenda-setting, reframing negatives and providing emotional support.

In this current scenario, choice and agenda-setting can look like something as simple as choosing snacks or some favorite activities to do in case of school closure. In terms of reframing a negative, a school closure might be suggestive as having positive aspects, such as, “It’s going to be nice to spend more time at home together as a family.”

### **Older Students and Teens**

Being informed and being anxious do not have to go hand in hand. Details for this age group, and learning about encouraging details specifically, may be very helpful. There is much misinformation, conspiracy, and fear-based reporting online that an older child may be exposed too, even in texts of conversations with peers. Arming teens with knowledge about realistic and trusted news sources and information may be extremely valuable to share.

Also involving older children in empowering activities can be helpful, with the understanding that a little goes a long way. It might include giving the child hand sanitizer for their backpack, taking them shopping for medicine or food to have on hand during a longer stay at home, or talking about ways to pass time if school is canceled for more than a week.

**Here are some more helpful resources:**

- [American Psychological Association: How to talk to children about difficult news](#)
- [Common Sense Media: Explaining the News to Our Kids](#)
- [Time Magazine: How to Talk to Kids About the Coronavirus Outbreak](#)
- [The New York Times: How to Talk to Kids About Coronavirus](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\)](#)
- [World Health Organization](#)

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