

Talking to Children About COVID-19 (Coronavirus): A Parent Resource

Concern over this new virus can make families and children anxious. Although we know that the virus is contagious, we also know that there are steps that we can take to reduce the risk of spreading of the virus. If our children are feeling anxious and worried, it is important to acknowledge their concern, and help them cope with their anxiety. This requires providing accurate information and age appropriate facts without causing undue alarm or stress. Please read ahead for some simple tips on managing children's anxiety about the virus.



It is important that children look to adults for guidance on how to react to stressful events. If parents seem overly worried, children's anxiety will rise. Parents should reassure children that health and school officials are working hard to help people throughout the country stay healthy. However, children also need some factual, age appropriate information about the potential risk and concrete instruction on how to avoid infection. Teaching children positive preventative measures, talking with them about their feelings, and giving them a sense of some control over their risk of infection can help reduce anxiety.

Specific guidelines:

1. Remain calm and reassuring

- Children will react to and follow your verbal and nonverbal reactions
- What you do and say about the virus will directly increase or decrease your child's anxiety
- Emphasise that you, the adult, will look after them and they don't need to worry
- Remind them that you and the adults at their school are there to help keep them safe and healthy
- Let your child talk about their feelings, validate them and discuss their concerns in an age appropriate way that they can understand

2. Make yourself available

- Children may need extra attention from you as they turn to you for reassurance
- It is important that they know they have someone that they can talk to who will listen to them;
- Reassure them that you love them and provide plenty of affection

3. Avoid excess blaming

- When tensions are high, we tend to feel the need to place blame on others, if we model this behaviour – our children will learn this too.
- It is important to avoid stereotyping any one group of people as being responsible for the virus
- Encourage positive comments to support other people, avoid blaming others – instead model kindness and compassion
- Be aware of other adult's comments when they are around your children. You may have to explain what those comments mean if they are different from yours or your family values.

4. Maintain a sense of normality.

- Stick to normal household routines
- Encourage good hygiene and physical health. It is important to closely monitor your child's health and wellbeing. Model healthy eating and regular exercise.

5. Monitor television and social media

- Limit access television/social media and the internet.
- Limit watching the news when your children are around. News reports tend to sensationalize the facts. Explain to your child that some of the information reported online may not be factual and may be based on rumours and inaccurate information
- Constantly watching updates about the virus can increase anxiety. If your child sees that you are anxious about it – they will be too.

6. Be honest and accurate

- In the absence of facts, children will often imagine the worst, don't ignore their concerns, but provide them with the truth – in an age appropriate way
- Let your children's questions be the guide as to what information to give them, however don't avoid giving them information that will help them understand and help them keep themselves healthy.
- Children can be told that germs are spread from person to person by coughing, sneezing and undue close contact with an infected person – this is the perfect opportunity to teach good personal hygiene – frequent hand washing, sneezing into a tissue and immediately throwing it away, coughing into their elbow. Giving children guidance on how to reduce the risk of infection provides them with a greater sense of control
- Openly discuss the precautions that school are taking to help keep everyone healthy. Reinforce that the school staff are sharing the important information with the adults, and that adults are working together to try and keep everyone healthy.

7. Model basic hygiene and healthy lifestyle practices

- Children learn best from what we do – not what we say! Model good personal hygiene (hand washing, using tissues and throwing them in the bin, coughing into their elbow, not sharing food and drinks)

SUMMARY...

- If your child is feeling worried, validate their feelings and provide plenty of reassurance
- It is important to provide children with age appropriate facts to reduce worry
- Do not engage in panic behaviours, this is clearly sending the message to our children that we are very concerned, if we are – then they will be too, and they often do not have the emotional intelligence to process this and will therefore expect the worse.
- Reassure them that the adults are all working together to help keep them healthy
- If your child is concerned encourage them to talk to an adult that they trust.
- Teach your child to respect and help others and not to jump to conclusion