

# Talking to Children About COVID-19

Concern over coronavirus, COVID-19, can make children and families anxious. Helping children cope with anxiety requires providing accurate prevention information and facts without causing undue alarm.

Children look to adults for guidance on how to react to stressful events. If parents seem overly worried, children's anxiety may rise. Provide factual, age appropriate information about the potential seriousness of disease risk and concrete instruction about how to avoid infections and spread of disease. In the absence of factual information, children often imagine situations far worse than reality. Teaching children positive preventive measures, talking with them about their fears, and giving them a sense of some control over their risk of infection can help reduce anxiety.

## Keep Explanations Age Appropriate

**Early elementary school children** need brief, simple information that should balance COVID-19 facts with appropriate reassurances that their schools and homes are safe and that adults are there to help keep them healthy and to take care of them if they do get sick. Give simple examples of the steps people take every day to stop germs and stay healthy, such as washing hands. Use language such as "adults are working hard to keep you safe."

**Upper elementary and early middle school children** will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what will happen if COVID-19 comes to their school or community. They may need assistance separating reality from rumor and fantasy. Discuss efforts of school and community leaders to prevent germs from spreading.

**Upper middle school and high school students** are able to discuss the issue in a more in-depth (adult-like) fashion and can be referred directly to appropriate sources of COVID-19 facts. Provide honest, accurate, and factual information about the current status of COVID-19. Having such knowledge can help them feel a sense of control.

- Children will react to and follow your verbal and nonverbal reactions, remain calm and reassuring.
- Be available, give your child plenty of affection and attention.
- Let your children talk about their feelings, help them name their fears. Even if their greatest fear is realized, in all likelihood, hope is still not lost.
- Don't ignore their concerns. Explain current facts, at the present moment very few people in this country are sick with COVID-19.
- Be honest, but avoid discussing adult concerns such as finances or work in front of your child.
- Maintain a normal routine.
- Practice good self-care including adequate sleep, proper nutrition, and physical activity.
- Practice mindfulness, meditation, deep breathing, yoga or other forms of self-care.
- Limit the time your child is exposed to media coverage. Constantly watching updates on the status can increase anxiety.
- Giving children guidance on what they can do to prevent infection gives them a greater sense of control over disease spread and will help to reduce their anxiety.
- If your child is having trouble getting past their responses to an outbreak or grieving, consider arranging for the child to talk with a mental health professional to help identify the areas of difficulty.

For additional factual information about COVID-19 contact your doctor or check the

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

Talking With Children: Tips for Caregivers, Parents, and Teachers During Infectious Disease Outbreaks, <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/Talking-With-Children-Tips-for-Caregivers-Parents-and-Teachers-During-Infectious-Disease-Outbreaks/SMA14-4886>

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