

Talking to Children About COVID-19 (novel coronavirus)

(With Excerpts from “What Happened to My World” by Jim Greenman)

COVID-19 (novel coronavirus), which was first identified in China and has recently been detected in many parts of the world, causes respiratory illness and mild to more serious symptoms. Adults and children alike are feeling concern over the virus, and families may wonder how to offer reassurance.

Children need our calm, empathetic presence. They need accurate information offered in “just right” amounts. They need emotional connections, predictable routines, and practical strategies that can help reduce their risk of infection while increasing their resilience and sense of control.

General Guidelines

- ▶ Be aware of your own reactions and fears. Children notice our anxiety through both verbal and nonverbal cues. Model healthy self-care by continuing to exercise, get adequate sleep, connect with others, and eat a nutritious diet. Children base their responses on those of the adults in their lives. They need a calm, reassuring perspective.
- ▶ Remind children that family members, teachers, and others care for them and are there to keep them safe and healthy. Local and national community health and government leaders are also working hard to prevent the disease’s spread.
- ▶ Ask children what they already know or if they have any questions. Offer age-appropriate information based on their responses. Very young children need simple explanations, such as, “Some people have been getting sick. We are being extra careful so we can stay healthy.” Elementary-age children will likely want a few more details, such as the disease’s symptoms and how and where it is spreading. Every child is different and it’s important to tailor your conversation to your child’s developmental level and needs.
- ▶ Listen to children’s fears and concerns. Offer empathy and understanding, but also help them realistically reframe their fears. The risk of becoming ill is currently low and most people who are infected have mild symptoms.
- ▶ Limit television and social media coverage. Repeated media exposure causes anxiety in children (and adults). Children don’t know a repeated news story is about the same situation versus a new incidence. Get the facts from a credible news source and then turn the news off. Tell children that the information they get from others or the internet might not always be reliable. Ask them to come to you instead.
- ▶ Understand that behavioral changes such as irritability, sleeplessness, or changes in appetite are a child’s way of communicating anxiety. With extra comfort and reassurance, these behaviors will likely subside. Contact school staff or a mental health professional with concerns.
- ▶ Maintain your typical routines as much as possible. Rituals like bedtime stories or after dinner games or walks anchor children in normalcy. Intentionally build emotional connections through play, music, art, conversation, and time in nature.
- ▶ Take positive action to stay healthy. Teach children to wash their hands frequently with soap and water. Cough or sneeze into a tissue or the bend of your elbow. Keep their immune system strong with exercise, a healthy diet, and adequate sleep.

- ▶ Consider limiting nonessential travel and visits to public places, such as museums, concerts, or shopping malls. Stay home if you're sick and avoid close contact with those who are ill.
- ▶ Show compassion and empathy for those impacted by the virus. Avoid making negative or stereotypical comments about others, such as blaming a group of people.
- ▶ Keep basic food, health, and cleaning supplies on hand in your home. Make a simple contingency plan for back-up child care or work disruptions. Be aware of the needs of friends, extended family, and neighbors. Simple preparations, as well as emotional connections, can alleviate anxiety.

Talking Points for Children

Children vary widely in their need for information and their ability to understand it. Tailor your conversations to fit your own child's situation, considering the following topics:

- ▶ The risk of becoming seriously ill is small. School and health officials are working to keep people healthy.
- ▶ Family members, friends, and school staff care about your health. Feel free to share your concerns and questions with an adult you trust.
- ▶ COVID-19 (novel coronavirus) is spread through close contact with someone who has the virus, through droplets in the air (from coughing and sneezing), or through touching an infected surface.
- ▶ Symptoms of the virus are usually similar to the common cold or mild flu—fever, cough, or shortness of breath.
- ▶ There are many things you can do to stay healthy:
 - Wash your hands with soap and water before meals and after you use the bathroom, wipe your nose, play outside, or handle animals.
 - Cover your mouth with a tissue or the bend of your elbow and wash hands afterward.
 - Use soap or a hand sanitizer if soap is unavailable. Frequently clean toys, counters, tables, and other surfaces with a sanitizing cleaner.

Children's Questions and Answers

Below are a few questions children might ask and some quick answers:

Question: What is coronavirus?

Answer: Coronaviruses are a group of viruses that make people sick. *Corona* is Latin for "crown." The virus when seen under a microscope looks like a crown with pointy blobs. The coronavirus that we are hearing about now, is a newly discovered virus called COVID-19.

Question: What are the symptoms?

Answer: Most people who get COVID-19 have symptoms like a cold or flu, such as fevers, coughs, body aches, or trouble breathing. Kids tend to have very mild symptoms.

Question: What about my parents and grandparents?

Answer: Just like at other times, some people tend to get sicker than others do. Older people, especially those who already have health problems, might have more serious symptoms, but doctors and nurses are doing everything they can to give the best care possible.

Question: Can anyone get COVID-19?

Answer: Yes. COVID-19 is spread through coughs, sneezes, and close contact with someone who's already sick. It doesn't matter what you look like or what country you come from.

Question: Will COVID-19 come to my town?

Answer: Some people have COVID-19. But, compared to how many people there are in the world, it is not a lot of people. Doctors, nurses, and scientists are working hard to keep the virus from spreading.

Note: For older children that may ask about amounts and percentages, you could show a visual example of a percentage with something like blocks, or beads, or crackers.

Question: What if I have questions or feel afraid?

Answer: It's always, always okay to talk with a grownup you trust if you have questions.

Conclusion

We don't know where or to what extent the virus might spread, but we can offer comfort and reassurance to children as we take care of ourselves, offer factual information based on the child's needs, build emotional connections and routines, and encourage positive preventative measures.

Additional Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19),
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/transmission.html>

Coping With Stress During Infectious Disease Outbreaks, <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/Coping-with-Stress-During-Infectious-Disease-Outbreaks/sma14-4885>

Just For Kids: A Comic Exploring the New Coronavirus,
<https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/02/28/809580453/just-for-kids-a-comic-exploring-the-new-coronavirus>

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>