



TALKING TO KIDS ABOUT COVID-19 (CORONAVIRUS)

Clinical psychologists Laura Gray, PhD, and Shayna Coburn, PhD, offer some concrete suggestions for talking to kids about COVID-19.

Parents and caregivers often struggle with how to talk to children about difficult or scary information. This can be especially hard when the adults themselves are worried or when they do not know all of the answers to their children's potential questions. Clinical psychologists Laura Gray, PhD, and Shayna Coburn, PhD, offer some concrete suggestions for talking to kids about COVID-19.

Things to do when talking to your kids about COVID-19

Be honest. Kids will overhear small bits of information and will fill in the blanks, often using their imaginations to create scary ideas and increasing worries. When talking to them, use actual terms and share facts, but be careful not to over-share information or to convey your own worries and anxieties.

Use age appropriate language and information. See our COVID-19 FAQs for kids for the answers to some questions your kids might have.

Share what kids CAN do to keep themselves, their family and their community safe. For example, they can encourage their friends to wash their hands, make elbow fives cool instead of fist bumps or hugs, practice good hand hygiene and avoid shaking hands.



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Teach healthy habits and behaviors. Be a role model for your child by doing these behaviors yourself as well:

- Practice hand washing: Help your kids learn to scrub all parts of their hands and under their nails, "make a white glove with bubbles" and the "ABC" song or "happy birthday" two times, or any other song lasting about 20 seconds. You can even make it a game by seeing who can sing the longest, who can make the most bubbles or who can sing with a fun accent.
- Review rules for handwashing: wash hands after using the bathroom, before eating or preparing food or if you cough/sneeze on your hands instead of your sleeve. Consider making it a rule for your kids to wash their hands when they come in the house. Remind them to use hand sanitizer if handwashing is not an option.
- Tell your kids to avoid putting objects or fingers in their mouths, especially at school.
- Remind them to avoid sharing food or frequently touched objects such as pencils, crayons and scissors.

Answer their questions. Let your kids know that they can ask you questions so they don't need to survey their friends to get answers. Remember, it's okay to say "I don't know" then repeat back to them reassuring facts, such as: "most people who get COVID-19 get better, especially if they were healthy before they got the virus."

Encourage kids who worry about COVID-19 to write or draw about their worries and to share them with you or another trusted adult.

Teach older kids where to get more information. Direct them to specific websites, such as the Centers for Disease Control and the World Health Organization, if they want to learn more. Read the websites with them and try to answer their questions. Discourage them from reading non-reputable sources or focusing a lot of time and attention on reading about the virus.

Things not to do when talking to your kids about COVID-19

Don't use scare tactics to get desired behavior change. For example, don't tell them, "If you don't wash your hands for 20 seconds you could get COVID-19 and die!"

Don't overshare about your own thoughts, fears or stress about the virus.

Don't talk about your own fears when your child is within hearing distance.

Don't give your child unmonitored access to news/media outlets.

Don't ignore their questions.

Don't refuse to give them facts or give false information.

Don't provide constant updates on infection rates or death tolls.

What to do if COVID -19 reaches your community

Normalize precaution measures by continuing the healthy habits mentioned above.

Review CDC guidelines with your family.

Talk about your family's "stay healthy plan" and tell your kids about community precautions and school action plans that are in place to help keep people healthy.

Reassure kids that doctors and hospitals can help people who do get sick. If your kids' school closes, create a home schedule with your child. Keeping kids active and knowing what to expect helps them feel more comfortable and less worried.

Give them jobs to help out. Older kids can help with cleaning and disinfecting at home. Younger kids can make "thank you" cards to encourage hospital workers or emergency personnel.

If you are worried about how your child is handling their worry/stress about COVID-19 or anything else, and it's interfering with their daily life (ability to sleep, spend time with friends, attend school), you should call a licensed therapist. For recommendations, you can ask your pediatrician, look up in-network providers through your insurance or search the Psychology Today website for clinicians near you who offer Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). The Children's National Psychology Outpatient Clinic can be reached at 202-476-5980, option 2.