



Supporting Children During Coronavirus (COVID19)

With the ever-changing landscape of our lives as you cope with the COVID-19 outbreak, you are trying to determine how best to help your family. Your children/teens may be worrying about the safety of your family, struggling with thoughts and feelings about the stories and images coming from coverage of COVID-19, and the uncertainty of not knowing when they can return to those routines that provided them comfort. They may turn to you or other trusted adults for support, help, and guidance. We hope that this resource will help you think about what you can do to make these times of uncertainty a bit less stressful.

Start the conversation

Many people worry that talking to young children will lead to increased worries and anxieties. The opposite is actually the case. Bringing difficult topics into the conversation can help lessen worries in children of all ages. Find a quiet, comfortable place to talk. Take a breath and bring it up.

You can say something like this:

- “There has been a lot of talk about coronavirus. Tell me what you know about it, or tell me what you’ve heard about it.”
- For tweens and teens, also consider, “Tell me what your friends are saying about coronavirus. What have you seen about this online?”

Starting the conversation allows you to listen to what your child/teen knows and gives you a place to begin as the conversation continues.

Correct Inaccurate Information

If you hear inaccurate information or misunderstandings from your children/teens, take time to provide the correct information in language your child/teen can understand.

Encourage your children to ask questions, and answer those questions directly.

Your children/teens may have some difficult questions about the coronavirus. For example, children may ask if it is possible that someone in the family may get the virus that causes COVID-19. The concern may be an issue for both you and your children/teens alike. This question is speaking to concerns about the safety and security of themselves and those they love. In your answer, stress what is being done in your family, the community, state, country, and the world to reduce risk. Question-and-answer exchanges help ensure ongoing support as your children begin to cope with emotions related to this virus.

For example:

- “While it is possible for someone in our family to get the virus, we are doing everything we know how to do to keep our family healthy. We are washing our hands well. We cover our noses and mouths when we sneeze. And, we are staying at home to prevent us from getting the virus. It’s not always fun, but we do it to keep ourselves and everyone else healthy. As always, we will also care for you if you get sick.”

Validate Emotions

As you have the conversation with your children, ask how they are feeling about this virus. Validate these emotions. While parents/caregivers may wish to say, “you don’t need to worry” or “there is no need to be upset, we will be fine,” it is extremely unlikely this will change the emotion. Unintentionally, it may result in children no longer sharing their emotions or believing that their emotions are not ok to have. It is important to acknowledge how they are feeling and to let children know all feelings are OK.

Help your children/teens to self-regulate

As you help children/teens to label their emotions, you also want them to engage in activities that help them self-regulate. These activities can include mindfulness, breathing exercises, exercise, and yoga.

Know Common Reactions

Your children may show you through their behavior that they are struggling with what they have heard or seen. Problems with attention and concentration may arise, which can impact learning. You may see increases in irritability and defiance, sleep and appetite changes, and general worry about what is happening now and what will happen in the future. Children and even teens may have more difficulty separating from you, seeking more attention. Approach any behavior change with compassion and acceptance, rather than labeling them as being weak or dismissing their feelings by saying “grow up” or “get over it”. Children need help and positive encouragement from you to deal with the stress. As you provide them with extra patience, be patient with yourself too!

Limit Media Exposure

Limit your children’s media exposure to coverage of COVID-19. Remember children often overhear or see what you are watching on TV or listening to on the radio. What may not be upsetting to you as an adult, may be upsetting and confusing for a child. For the very young, exposure should be rare. Remember to limit your own exposure. Adults, too, may become more distressed with nonstop exposure to the media coverage of this outbreak. While keeping updated about guidance, remember to get your information from a trusted source such as the CDC and your local public health officials.

Stay Connected

Social distancing is the phrase of the day, but this does not mean that you should isolate from family and friends. Find ways to stay connected through calls, FaceTime, Skype, text messaging, letters, and virtual games and activities. You can connect with friends and neighbors by small acts of kindness such as taking baked goods to leave at a neighbor’s door, bringing out trash cans to the curb for someone, or sending letters of thanks to medical personnel or first responders.

Re-establish A Routine

Developing a routine your children and family can help reduce distress during these stressful days. Besides meal time and bedtime, routine can include learning times as well as play time and time for family activities. Be sure to include calm and quiet time for each member of the family too.

Provide Reassurance

As you talk to your children, remember to provide reassurance and a sense of hope that the actions you and your family are taking will help to “flatten the curve,” resulting in the ending of the outbreak much faster.

Address Missed Developmental Milestones

Many children/teens have had missed developmental opportunities due to staying at home (e.g., incomplete sport seasons, not having a graduation or last day at a specific school, missed field trips designated for specific grades, changes in cultural and religious milestones). Acknowledge your children’s disappointments, problem-solve if there are ways to honor the missed opportunity later or in a different way (e.g., family will go to DC later in the year or will take a virtual tour of the museum they had look forward to visiting), or find creative ways to honor milestones (e.g., immediate family has graduation celebration and extended families can make video congratulation messages to the graduate).

Be A Positive Role Model

Consider sharing your feelings about COVID-19 with your children/teens at a level they can understand. You may express worry even frustration for what is happening. You may share some anxiety, but it is important for you to also share with your children/teens ideas for coping. Remind them what everyone in the family is doing to stay healthy and well. Talk about the many helpers. Consider how the family may also consider helping too.

Practice Self-Care

As parents/caregivers, you are better able to care for your children/teens if you take care of yourselves. Make sure you find ways each day to care for yourself. Practice good rest/sleep, healthy eating, and exercise. What can bring you calm? Bring you joy? Find one practical activity to do each day.

Extra Help

Should reactions continue or at any point interfere with your children’s/ teens’ abilities to function or you are worried, contact your child’s doctor or a mental health professional. If you need some extra help, seek similar services for yourself. There are helplines as well as mental health professionals providing their services through telehealth.

One such hotline to get support regarding your anxiety or stress is the SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline at 1-800-985-5990 or by texting TalkWithUS 66746.