

Talking with Children & Youth about COVID-19

These are difficult times for all of us as we face the realities of a world pandemic with COVID-19. Many of us may be feeling anxious and overwhelmed as we listen and watch news reports and stories that pop up on Facebook and other social media sites. It is easy to go into overload with all this information.

As adults we can find this difficult to deal with, the same may be true for our children.

Children may have a difficult time with what they are hearing and how they are processing what is happening in the world around them. That is why it is so important for us to “check” in with our children.

Remember a child’s imagination can conjure up fears far worse than reality.

Children are more tuned into the world around them than we might realize.

When talking with your children keep it simple and age appropriate.

Answer the questions they ask, but be reassuring and help them understand what they can do to help protect themselves.

Be honest, but be reassuring. Be calm.

Try to limit what children are seeing on TV and the Internet, do this for yourself as well. Make sure to go to factual sites.

***If anxiety becomes overwhelming for either you or children and is interfering with daily life it may be time to seek help with a professional. Please see our website for telephone numbers and resources.**

There are some wonderful resources in helping you talk with your children, again make sure they are reputable sites.

Below is information from PBS.com to help with young children and information for talking with teens from Harvard.edu

BELOW IS INFORMATION FROM: PBS.COM with links to information specifically designed for young children.

Provide just enough information about the new coronavirus

Think about what your child absolutely needs to know to understand what the virus is and what to do about it. If you have your own questions about the coronavirus, check reliable

sources, such as the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), which offers a range of information about the virus. The World Health Organization's [myth busters page](#) can help you give correct answers to some surprising questions and misinformation that is spreading.

Four questions children may have about the new coronavirus

Before you start, ask what your child knows so far in case you need to clarify anything, and find out what questions your child has. Below are four common questions your child might ask and suggested responses.

What is the new coronavirus? The new coronavirus is a kind of germ that can make people feel sick. Remember how the flu made (you/your classmate/anyone your child knows) feel? It can be a lot like getting the flu. Some people feel just a little bit sick. Some people get a fever and a cough. Sometimes, the cough can make it hard to breathe easily.

How do you catch this coronavirus? The virus spreads like the flu, or a cold or cough. If a person who has the coronavirus sneezes or coughs, germs that are inside the body come outside of the body. That's because sneezes and coughs can send germs into the air.

When the germs go into the air, they can travel for up to six feet—probably further than you are tall. That's why it's important to stand six feet apart from people other than your family. You don't want to breathe in air with germs.

A healthy person also might get germs on their hands. This might happen by touching someone who is sick, or touching surfaces where germs landed because someone sick sneezed or coughed or touched those surfaces. To keep germs on hands from getting inside the body, wash your hands with soap and water or use hand sanitizer afterward. Try not to touch your mouth, eyes, or inside your nose because those are places where the germs can get inside the body.

Kids and grownups can try their best to stay healthy by practicing these healthy behaviors:

- Sneeze or cough into tissues (and throw them away) or sneeze or cough into your elbow. This helps keep germs from traveling and making other people sick.
- Wash your hands with soap and water at the same times you usually do, like after going to the bathroom, before eating, and after blowing your nose. When you wash your hands, remember to count slowly to 20. (Parents can help by singing the ABCs or "Happy Birthday" with their children the number of times it takes for 20 seconds to pass. This helps children remember to wash for a sufficient amount of time.)
- Try to keep your hands out of your mouth, eyes, and nose.

Why are some people wearing masks? Should I wear a mask? Masks are for people who are sick to wear so that they don't share germs. The masks also are for medical staff, like doctors and nurses, to wear so they can help people who have the virus. You do not need to wear a mask.

Can you die from the new coronavirus? Most people who have caught the virus have not died, just like with the flu. Doctors are working really hard to keep an eye on anyone who is feeling sick. They want to make sure everyone gets the help they need and to keep the virus from spreading.

What is important is that you keep doing what you love to do and not let worries about the virus boss you around. If you're doing what you love while practicing healthy behaviors like sneezing into your elbow and washing your hands after you go to the bathroom, then you're showing the virus and the worries who is boss instead!

Model calmness about the new coronavirus

Even though you may be concerned yourself, it is important to model calmness when talking about the virus. Children will look to you to see how afraid they should be. Think about flying on an airplane when there is turbulence. A flight attendant that appears terrified may make you think there is something really wrong and you should worry. If a flight attendant calmly offers you a beverage with a smile, you might think there's just some windy weather that will pass soon.

Limit news exposure on the new coronavirus

Although the news can be helpful by keeping everyone informed, sometimes news stories can use wording that is strong and scary for children. Try to limit news-viewing to the hours after children go to sleep, or read the news independently so that children do not hear the stories.

Keep an eye out for reassurance seeking

It's natural for children to ask questions, particularly about something that is new to them. Sometimes, though, a child's anxiety seems to be asking the questions, prompting a behavior called reassurance seeking. It may look like a child repeatedly asking the same or similar questions, yet the child's distress increases no matter how many times you answer the questions. If you notice repeated reassurance seeking (repeated asking of the questions above, for example), then it might be helpful to seek support to help your children manage anxiety. **Cognitive behavioral therapy** (CBT) can offer your family strategies for handling and easing reassurance-seeking behaviors. Ask your doctor to recommend mental health professionals who practice CBT and have experience working with children struggling with anxiety.

Remember, everyone is working hard to manage the virus. You can show your children that you, too, can continue to do what is important to you while practicing healthy behaviors.

Earlier this week, I overheard my kids engaged in a round of “I heard” and “Did you know?” while they were getting ready for bed.

“I heard that Margaret’s dad has it,” said my six-year-old.

“Did you know that it’s the worst sickness ever?” added my eight-year-old.

Neither statement is accurate, but they were revealing: I had thought my initial conversations with my kids about COVID-19 had been good enough. But with adults, kids at school and the news all hyper-focused on this coronavirus outbreak, my reassuring voice needed to be a little louder.

A favorite Mister Rogers’ quote ran through my mind: “Anything that’s human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting and less scary.”

So before lights out, we talked. I asked what they had heard about the coronavirus. We got it all out — their questions, their “I heard” and their fears. The rest of the conversation had three themes.

[READ MORE: Feeling worried? Here are helpful tips on how your family can de-stress.](#)

First, I shared age-appropriate facts and corrected misinformation. Because my kids are young, I kept it simple. “You know what it’s like to have a cold or the flu — how sometimes you get a cough or have a fever? This is kind of like that. Most people who catch this sickness stay home, rest and get all better. And we have wonderful doctors and nurses who can help people when they need it.”

Second, I reassured them that they are safe, which is the most important message my kids can hear from me. I know that they take their emotional cues from my tone. “You don’t need to worry. Right now, lots of amazing grown-ups are working hard to keep people healthy. Luckily, we already know a lot about how to keep healthy!”

Third, I emphasized simple things *our* family can do to be “germ busters” — for all types of germs that are out there! As Harvard’s Dr. Richard Weissbourd [once shared with me](#), kids and adults alike are “more distressed when we feel helpless and passive, and more comfortable when we are taking action.” The hygiene routines that slow the spread of the COVID-19 are the same habits that help keep us healthy all year round.

[Is school closed? Get daily activities and tips you can use to help kids play and learn at home. Sign up here.](#)

A few days after this conversation, my kids’ schools closed indefinitely — and so did sports practices, playdates and a host of routine outings. Like most of the nation, my family is staying home for a while, and this brought up new questions and worries for my kids. The

three themes above still apply to all our follow-up conversations, but I have added a new dimension to what our family can do to be “germ busters:” We can practice social distancing.

I explained it like this: “Germs like to travel from person to person. Have you ever noticed how kids in your class sometimes get sick at the same time? If lots of people stay home for a while, it will be hard for the Coronavirus germs to travel to new people — and that’s good news for doctors and nurses who are helping people who get sick.” A few hours later, I heard my 8-year-old re-explain it this way to her kindergarten brother: “This sickness isn’t a big deal for you or for me, but we need to be germ-busters so we can protect other people — like grandma and grandpa! This is how we help.”

Of course, that doesn’t mean social distancing is going to be easy. We are planning creative ways to stay in touch with family and friends — such as “story time” with different relatives over video chat each day. I am hoping they eventually see this as a time when our community pulled together to help others, and had some fun along the way spending extra time with their family.

Here are four ways we can help young kids build germ-busting habits.

Wash Your Hands

Make it a family routine before every meal and snack to wash hands. If you do it together, you can model for them how to use soap, rub your hands together and rinse. For a timer, try slowly singing the ABCs together while you scrub. In *Curious George, the Man with the Yellow Hat* has a cold. He [teaches George how germs can move from person to person](#) and that’s important to wash your hands and avoid sharing utensils. [Good hand washers, like Daniel Tiger, are germ busters!](#)

Catch that Cough

When kids cough or sneeze, they tend to do it right into their hands — and then they use those hands to touch everything in sight! Instead, [we can cough and sneeze into our elbow](#). Make it a game with kids. Can they catch the cough in their elbow? In the beginning, cheer when they do: “You caught it! That’s what germ busters do!” If they accidentally “catch it in their hands,” they can simply wash their hands with soap and water and start the game again.

"Rest is Best"

Daniel Tiger reminds us that [“When you’re sick, rest is best!”](#) This is a [good episode](#) to show kids and a great song to sing when they are feeling under the weather. Tell them: When we are sick, we can stay home and rest our bodies; we can be germ busters by not spreading germs or going to school sick. And as parents, we can keep ourselves and our kids home if we have a fever or other symptoms.

Practice Healthy Habits

Remind kids that sleep, exercise and eating healthy foods are good, everyday ways to strengthen our bodies. We will all get sick sometimes! They have probably already had at

least one cold this season. But we can be responsible germ busters when we practice handwashing, cough-catching, resting and basic healthy living.

Looking for more, easier, helpful tools to practice healthy habits with your children?

Check out these PBS KIDS videos, games and activities all about hand washing and staying healthy:

Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood

["Daniel Gets a Cold / Mom Tiger is Sick" \(FULL EPISODE\)](#)

["Rest is Best" Strategy Song \(VIDEO\)](#)

[Germs Germs Go Away With Handwashing \(VIDEO\)](#)

[A Germ-Fighting Superhero \(VIDEO\)](#)

[In My Bathroom Game](#)

[Play at Home with Daniel Tiger App](#)

[Daniel Tiger for Parents App](#)

[Doctor Daniel Game](#)

Sesame Street

[Step by Step Handwashing with Elmo](#)

[Elmo and Rosita: The Right Way to Sneeze! \(VIDEO\)](#)

[Abby and Elmo's Potty Plan! Game](#)

Curious George

[The Man With the Yellow Hat Explains How Germs Work \(VIDEO\)](#)

Super Why!

[ABC Scrub With Me! Activity](#)

We seem to be stuck in a nonstop news cycle about the new coronavirus which is also called COVID-19. Many parents are understandably sharing concerns, too — at least among friends and families. It’s also possible that teenagers are talking to their own friends and surfing the web and social media sites to gather information, including potential misinformation.

How can you make sure teenagers are informed just enough without feeling overwhelmed, yet also have accurate information? Your teen already may be asking many questions. Even if not, it might be a good idea to find out what your teen has heard in case you need to clarify information and ask them if they have any worries. (If you have younger children, see my blog post on [talking to children about coronavirus](#).)

If you have your own questions about the new coronavirus, check reliable sources, such as the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), which offers a range of information about the virus. The World Health Organization’s [myth busters page](#) can help you give correct answers to some surprising questions and misinformation that is spreading.

TALKING TO TEENS ABOUT COVID-19 – This information is from Harvard.edu

Before you start, ask what your child knows so far in case you need to clarify anything, and find out what questions your child has. Below are some questions teens might ask about the new coronavirus and some suggested responses.

What caused this new coronavirus?

Coronaviruses cause the common cold and the flu. This coronavirus is believed to have [started in animals](#) and then passed on to humans at a live animal market in China.

Why now?

This is actually not the first time that there has been a widespread virus that started in animals and spread to humans. Another example is the severe acute respiratory syndrome ([SARS](#)) outbreak in 2002 that was caused by a different coronavirus. That virus eventually was contained. Doctors, scientists, and government officials are working hard to do the same with this newest coronavirus.

One reason why we are hearing more about this virus is because of how fast it is spreading and how much it has affected people in many different countries. Another reason is that we also have many more ways of sharing information than we did in 2002, and posts now have the ability to “go viral” themselves. If you notice that you are becoming distressed after reading all of the posts about the virus, then it might be helpful to limit how much you read about the virus in the news and on sites or apps, to be informed just enough.

Can our pets get sick?

There is little evidence that domesticated pets, including dogs and cats at home, are likely to get sick from this new coronavirus, or **spread the virus**.

Can you die from the new coronavirus?

Most people — probably more than 95% and possibly more than 99% — who have gotten sick from the new coronavirus have not died. The death rate is likely even lower than has been reported in the news because, just like with the flu, some people with mild cases of the virus may not have gone to the doctor to get tested.

Will my school close because of concerns regarding the new coronavirus?

Some communities may decide to temporarily close places, including schools, to give communities affected by illness caused by the virus a chance to prevent it from spreading quickly. This has happened before when some schools have had high rates of other viruses, including the norovirus. Those schools reopened later. If your school makes the decision to close temporarily, we will hear more about that.

Should we stay home to remain safe, so we don't catch the new coronavirus?

People who are infected with the new coronavirus are asked to stay home for about two weeks. Also, people who might have been exposed to the virus are asked to stay home for a period of time to make sure they don't develop any symptoms of the virus.

If you don't have the virus, then you should continue to do what you need and love to do. Practice the same everyday healthy habits that you would (or should) do anyway. You'll be on track if you:

- Sneeze or cough into tissues (and throw them away) or sneeze or cough into your elbow. These behaviors help keep germs from traveling and making other people sick.
- Wash your hands with soap and water after going to the bathroom, before eating, and after blowing your nose. When you wash your hands, remember to count slowly to 20.
- Try to avoid touching your mouth, eyes, and nose, which are places where the germs can enter your body.
- Try to get enough sleep and eat well to help your body stay healthy.

Additional tips for supporting your teen

- Remind teens that everyone is working hard to manage the virus.

- Although it may seem difficult, it is important to model calmness. Teens will look to parents to gauge how worried they should be, even though it may seem like they just tune you out!
- Show your teens that it's possible to continue to do what is important to you while practicing healthy behaviors.
- If it becomes necessary to adjust plans, be transparent and direct with your teen so that they understand the rationale behind the decision. For example, if you have to postpone travel because of new advice about safe travel, then let your teen know that. Check the [CDC travel advisories](#) for up-to-date information. You can add that the trip was postponed because it was not a necessary trip, and that the family will continue to do what is necessary each day.

For additional information, see our blog on [what parents should know and do about the coronavirus](#) and our [Coronavirus Resource Center](#).