



Tips for Talking to Your Child About Coronavirus and Managing Anxiety

by Dr. Elizabeth Adams

Don't Shy away from Discussions

- Children are exposed to information via news outlets and friends, but often aren't able to understand or process what they hear. It is highly possible that your child has been exposed to scary information or misinformation. Take control of the messaging and help your child process. Ask your child what they know and have heard and keep the dialogue open.
- Parents sometimes try to "protect" children by avoiding an anxiety provoking topic, but this can do more harm than good. Kids often pick up on more than we give them credit for. If we try to hide information, dismiss their concerns, or avoid filling in the gaps, children will create their own scenarios and will feel more anxiety.

Speak at a Level They Can Understand

You may be wondering, "What exactly do I say?" This will depend on the age of your child and their emotional maturity. Start by having them tell you what they know and what they understand, and work from there. Let them ask you questions and answer as concisely as possible. Avoid flooding your child with information or exposing them to information beyond what they can handle.

- There are ways to talk to children about difficult subjects. For some guidance on how to break down coronavirus in a way that is understandable for young children, [check out this comic shared by NPR.](#)
- You set the tone, and you should set it to calm.
 - For example, if you see your child approaching a potentially 'germy' spot in a public space, remember it's just as quick and effective to gently take their hand and physically move them away, or calmly call their name, as it is to shout, "Don't touch that!"
- Children take their cues from us – we act as their emotional thermostat. Be aware when little ears are listening and be careful not to make broad and scary statements. Set limits around news consumption in your household. Excessive news alerts or discussion of coronavirus will only increase stress levels for everyone.

Keep the Conversation Open, but Don't Get Stuck

- A conversation about coronavirus is likely to go beyond a one-time chat. Check in periodically with your child about how they are feeling and ask if they have any questions.
- If your child approaches you with a question that you're not comfortable answering, you can say, "Let me think about that and get back to you." Just make certain you do circle back with them after you've had time for consideration.

- If your child gets stuck on talking about the topic, set up a 'Worry Time' when they can talk about their concerns. If questions arise outside of 'Worry Time,' help them write them down (or draw pictures) and put them in a box. This will help them from getting stuck and obsessively revisiting their worries all day.

Routines Are Comforting -- Be Solutions-Focused

With school closures, event cancellations and social distancing the new norm, all routines are thrown off. Following are some suggestions to structure your days at home:

- Block out the day by writing down a simple plan on paper. This could look like: Breakfast; play time; picnic lunch; rest/nap/quiet time; movie; dinner; bath; and bed. Let your child help decorate the plan, if they're interested, and stick it to the wall or refrigerator. Knowing what to expect is incredibly calming for children, and it will help you, too.
- If you and your spouse are both attempting to work from home AND take care of your child(ren), plan in advance who will take which block, and try to protect them from interruption when it's their turn to be the working parent. Communicate with your boss/clients and keep their expectations realistic. You are simply not going to be as productive as childless employees working from home. Do not let the endless pressure for productivity force you to sacrifice your own sleep at night, as this lowers your immune system.
- When it comes to play time, you can certainly buy your children some new toys/craft materials, but new 'stuff' will only get you so far. You can facilitate your child's play in other ways, such as: moving a neglected toy to a new area of the house; arranging an attractive tray of the art materials you already own; and filling a large plastic tub with water and cups and putting some towels down. Look on platforms like Pinterest for creative ways to play with the things you already have in your house.
- When you can, find ways to get movement and time outside.
- Connect with your social network via your smartphone, while being mindful of your child's experience. At such a difficult time, it is critically important that parents lean on their friends and family to stave off anxiety and loneliness. However, if you are reading to your child and drop off mid-book to answer a text or call, they may feel abandoned and are likely to act out to regain your attention. Putting some intention and structure around the way you interact with your phone isn't easy, but it will help everyone.
- Allow room for grace and forgiveness! If certain expectations need to relax at this time, it is perfectly understandable (e.g., if a little more screen time than normal occurs, it's fine!). We are all facing an unprecedented situation.