

Talking to Children About COVID-19

When violence, disaster, accidents, and now pandemics are in the news, it's often difficult to know what to say to kids. What follows are some general tips to help you help your children through whatever may be frightening them -- and you.

- **If your kids are discussing it, you need to discuss it.** If you don't, you send the message that it is too horrible to discuss, and that is terrifying to children. What kids imagine is worse than the facts.
- **Stick to the facts.** There are lots of rumors and unfounded information. Stick to what is known and say "We don't know" for the questions that don't have answers.
- **Emphasize that this is a big deal because it is unusual.** Kids don't have the perspective we do that what makes the news is the rare, not the common.
- **The word "very" is your best friend when you're talking to kids.** This is very, very, very, very unusual. Them being in danger is very, very, very, very unlikely.
- **Emphasize what we can do that is positive.** Social distancing can be framed as a powerful act the whole country is taking to help stop this crisis. Kids are helping by staying home, and they should be encouraged to feel good about it. Brainstorm other things you might do, like video chatting with people who are alone, writing letters to people in the hospital, or donating money to local relief organizations.
- **If you yourself are in harm's way, emphasize that you are doing everything you can to stay safe,** and that you are doing what you're doing to help others. Promise them that they will always be taken care of no matter what. Answer their questions about this if they voice them, even the painful ones like "what will happen to me if you die?" They need to know there is a plan. On the other hand, if they aren't asking, don't give them more information than they need.
- **Everyone deals with fear and related feelings in their own way.** Some kids don't want to talk about it. Some kids do. Some seem "inappropriate" in what they say. Don't reprimand them.
- **It's OK to be scared or upset in front of your kids.** They will pick up on your emotions whether you like it or not. Modeling that feelings can be OK and don't mean being out of control helps them learn to regulate their own emotions. **Don't dwell on it.** Once the facts and feelings have come out, it's time to get on with your regular routine. Make sure kids know you're available to talk later if they want.
- **Short term normal reactions** include changes in appetite and sleep. It may also turn up in children's artwork and in conversations about other frightening or sad things they have experienced. All of these things should fade as time goes on. If they don't, or if you are concerned, consult your pediatrician or a mental health professional

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