



10 tips for talking about COVID-19 with your kids

[Health](#) Mar 16, 2020 5:13 PM EDT

First it was gun violence. Then it was climate change.

Now it's an honest-to-goodness pandemic that has infiltrated our communities and collective consciousness — leaving us stammering, yet again, for the right words to explain terrible things to our children.

If you are a parent or caregiver and feeling unsure about what to share, how much to say, and ways to navigate COVID-19 when so much is uncertain, you're not alone. Families the world over are with you on this one.

Here are some tips to get you through as the outbreak continues.

1. **Make children feel safe.**

We are battling two enemies here: One is Covid-19; the other is the anxiety about Covid-19. Kids may be all but immune from this new virus, but they are susceptible to the anxiety surrounding it. Watch your words and tone. Stay calm. Reassure children that this is temporary and that they, and their caregivers, are going to be just fine.

2. **Give them facts, and let them lead the discussion.**

Children need simple, honest answers. Avoid hushing your talk when they walk into a room, and never lie. You might say: "The coronavirus is a type of germ. These germs are very, very tiny, and when they get inside your body, they can make you sick. The germs get in your body through your nose, mouth or eyes. When someone coughs and touches a doorknob, and then you touch the doorknob, those germs might get into your body. It's helpful to wash our hands a lot and try to stay away from big crowds." A rule of thumb? Let them lead the discussion. "Too much information can create anxiety," says Linda Hatfield, a parent-education coach and one of my co-authors on [ParentShift: Ten](#)

[Universal Truths That Will Change the Way You Raise Your Child](#). “Answer only what they ask. Also, avoid language that blames race, animals or culture for the spread of the virus.” If you’re looking for specific words to use, [BrainPOP put out a great little video for young children](#). Check it out.

3. Give them power — and responsibility.

Kids do better when they have power; it’s one of their emotional needs. And this is a great time to give it to them. After all, children are proving to be kind of like superheroes in this; their bodies seem to have an extraordinary ability to fight off the coronavirus in ways that many other bodies cannot. But with great power comes great responsibility, right? Kids can help their neighbors and loved ones stay safe and healthy if they frequently wash their hands with soap and water for 20 seconds, or as long as it takes to sing “Happy Birthday” twice. Remind them to wipe down their devices often, as well, and to cough or sneeze into their elbows or a tissue. You might tell them that hand-washing is like kryptonite to the coronavirus, and hand-sanitizer is a perfectly good stand-in when they can’t find soap and water.

4. Let them know what to expect.

The rough part here is we don’t know exactly what to expect in the weeks and months ahead. But we do know some things. We know, for instance, we’re going to be seeing a lot less of the people in our lives. We know that we’re going to have to find creative ways to pass the time at home. We know that we aren’t going to have access to all the foods we like, and that we’ll have to work harder to keep ourselves, and our homes, clean. And we know that Covid-19 can resemble a typical cold. While there is a potential to get very sick and even die, many people — especially children — have reported only mild symptoms — fever, runny nose and cough.

5. Empathy, empathy, empathy.

So much good can be done when we allow our kids to express the full range of their emotions, and when we receive those feelings with empathy. If their fears and frustrations are minimized or dismissed, Hatfield says, they likely will show up in other ways — fighting with siblings, throwing tantrums or being generally uncooperative. For small children with big emotions, she says, get on their level and say something affirming like, “I imagine you are worried about getting sick. I wonder if you are frightened about all the things that are suddenly changing.” For kids feeling the pinch of isolation, you could say, “It’s so frustrating to not compete in your dance team program.

You had looked forward to that for months!” You don’t have to agree with a child’s thoughts or feelings to acknowledge them without judgment or minimizing.

6. Keep your child’s developmental stage and temperament in mind.

Let’s be honest: Your explorative, tactile kid won’t suddenly start keeping his “hands to home” just because the stakes are higher. Your perpetually forgetful preschooler won’t suddenly memorize the steps to correct hand-washing just because you’ve told her in “your serious voice” how to do it. Depending on their ages, stages and temperaments, some children will require more reassurance or more time to transition than others. The situation is unique, and so is your child. Keep your expectations in check. If things go sideways in unexpected ways, it might be a good time to say “isn’t that interesting?” and let it go.

7. Try to maintain a normal routine.

It’s not easy to “stick to routine” when school closures have upended our routines massively. But try to establish a new routine, as best you can. As we all know, some kids are frightened and overwhelmed by big changes in their environments. For these little ones, allow plenty of time for them to adapt to the new system. Hatfield suggests making a calendar, perhaps with pictures, that helps kids envision how things will go.

8. Model the behavior you want to see.

Children look to us for guidance and support, especially in trying times. “We are their North Star on how to respond,” Hatfield says. “Model a positive confidence about the topic, and stay grounded.” That goes for issues like hygiene and social isolation, too. You can’t expect a 6-year-old to wash her hands or a 10-year-old to isolate from his friends if their parents aren’t willing to do the same.

9. Consider adjusting the screen time limits.

With so many of us working from home, and unable to count on our usual childcare, getting by is a good thing; this isn’t the time to beat ourselves up. If you need to temporarily adjust your screen-time limits, do it. Just be smart about it; if you loosen all the limits around addictive games or programs, those things will be much harder to manage after things calm down, Hatfield says. “So try to be specific about how much time is allowed and with whom they can communicate.” Get ideas online about other things to do with kids that are not screen-related, and remember that they need to run and play. Without school recess, you may want to implement “yard time” to get them moving. Also, if possible, encourage the use of social apps, such as Skype or Facetime, where your kids can interact with others. Social connection is important, especially at a time of social distancing. Virtual playdates may help keep cooped-up kids feeling balanced and sane.

10. Take care of yourself.

These are anxiety-producing times on a number of levels; we parents are shouldering a lot. Be sure to take care of yourself. Turn off the news; too much discouraging news is bad for our health — and our kids' health. Run a bath; light candles; take a walk or a long afternoon nap; meditate. Look for sensory experiences — pet the dog or cat, flip through a family vacation album, put on some music or bake cookies. Do things that make you feel good and centered. Do whatever you can to calm your own nerves so that you have the bandwidth to handle your children's difficult questions and challenging behavior.

The days ahead will be different for us all, and difficult for some of us. But this need not be a bad time for your family.

“Take this opportunity to reflect and make some positive changes to your new normal,” Hatfield suggests. “Slow down and play games, read books, snuggle and cuddle, cook together, authentically connect and play together.”

You and your child will get through this — and, if you're lucky, you may even be a little better for it in the end.

Coronavirus (COVID-19): Social Distancing With Children

Reviewed by: [Jonathan M. Miller, MD](#)

<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/coronavirus-social-distancing.html>

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#) is spreading through communities in many countries now. The best way to fight this spread is for everyone to practice social distancing.

What Is Social Distancing?

Social distancing puts space between people. When people who are infected with the [virus](#) stay away from others, they can't pass it to anyone else. This way, fewer people get sick at the same time. Then, doctors and hospitals are better able to keep up with treating those who need care.

Social distancing can be done in different ways, depending on how many people in the community are sick. Social distancing methods include:

- closing schools, restaurants, shops, movie theaters, and other places where people gather
- not getting together in person with friends
- not going to stores unless it is necessary
- working from home
- not taking public transportation, including buses, subways, taxis, and rideshares

What Can I Do?

While the coronavirus is still spreading, it's best to take a "better safe than sorry" approach. This means:

- [Keep your family home](#) and away from others as much as possible. Don't have friends and extended family over, and don't go to their homes. People who look healthy still can be infected and can spread the virus. That's why it's important to stay away from everyone, even if they don't seem sick.
- If you have to go out, make sure you are at least 6 feet (2 meters) away from other people. Viruses can spread when someone sneezes or coughs out tiny droplets. These droplets don't usually travel more than 6 feet before falling to the ground.

- If you're caring for someone who is sick, [take all recommended precautions](#). It's important to keep that person away from others.

Why Are Schools Closing if Kids Aren't Sick?

With the coronavirus, kids don't seem to get as sick as adults. But infected kids can still spread the virus to people who could become seriously ill. Closing schools protects everyone in a community.

Can Kids Still Get Together With Friends?

For now, people **should not go** to places like movie theaters or restaurants, or to group events, sports activities, and even playdates.

Being away from friends, extended family, and social activities can be hard on teens and kids. To help them stay connected, you might set up FaceTime or Skype visits or playdates. You also can plan family activities. Taking a walk or a hike or riding bikes are great ways to get out and get active without having physical contact. If you go to parks, keep kids off of communal equipment (stuff that lots of kids use, like jungle gyms).

If people do come into your home, make sure that everyone [washes their hands](#) when they arrive and leave. Also, clean surfaces that get touched a lot (like doorknobs) before and after visits.

You Can Still Be Social

The official phrase is "social distancing," but it can help to think of it as "physical distancing" instead. We can still be social, just in different ways. Take advantage of social media and video apps to support each other, laugh together, and take care of each other until the virus is under control.

Reviewed by: [Jonathan M. Miller, MD](#)

Date reviewed: March 2020

February 29, 2020

Talking to Children About COVID-19 (Coronavirus) A Parent Resource

A new type of coronavirus, abbreviated COVID-19, is causing an outbreak of respiratory (lung) disease. It was first detected in China and has now been detected internationally. While the immediate health risk in the United States is low, it is important to plan for any possible outbreaks if the risk level increases in the future.

Concern over this new virus can make children and families anxious. While we don't know where and to what extent the disease may spread here in the United States, we do know that it is contagious, that the severity of illness can vary from individual to individual, and that there are steps we can take to prevent the spread of infection. Acknowledging some level of concern, without panicking, is appropriate and can result in taking actions that reduce the risk of illness. Helping children cope with anxiety requires providing accurate prevention information and facts without causing undue alarm.

It is very important to remember that children look to adults for guidance on how to react to stressful events. If parents seem overly worried, children's anxiety may rise. Parents should reassure children that health and school officials are working hard to ensure that people throughout the country stay healthy. However, children also need factual, age appropriate information about the potential seriousness of disease risk and concrete instruction about how to avoid infections and spread of disease. Teaching children positive preventive measures, talking with them about their fears, and giving them a sense of some control over their risk of infection can help reduce anxiety.

Specific Guidelines

Remain calm and reassuring.

- Children will react to and follow your verbal and nonverbal reactions.
- What you say and do about COVID-19, current prevention efforts, and related events can either increase or decrease your children's anxiety.
- If true, emphasize to your children that they and your family are fine.
- Remind them that you and the adults at their school are there to keep them safe and healthy.
- Let your children talk about their feelings and help reframe their concerns into the appropriate perspective.

Make yourself available.

- Children may need extra attention from you and may want to talk about their concerns, fears, and questions.
- It is important that they know they have someone who will listen to them; make time for them.
- Tell them you love them and give them plenty of affection.

Avoid excessive blaming.

- When tensions are high, sometimes we try to blame someone.
- It is important to avoid stereotyping any one group of people as responsible for the virus.
- Bullying or negative comments made toward others should be stopped and reported to the school.
- Be aware of any comments that other adults are having around your family. You may have to explain what comments mean if they are different than the values that you have at home.

Monitor television viewing and social media.

- Limit television viewing or access to information on the Internet and through social media. Try to avoid watching or listening to information that might be upsetting when your children are present.
- Speak to your child about how many stories about COVID-19 on the Internet may be based on rumors and inaccurate information.
- Talk to your child about factual information of this disease—this can help reduce anxiety.
- Constantly watching updates on the status of COVID-19 can increase anxiety—avoid this.
- Be aware that developmentally inappropriate information (i.e., information designed for adults) can cause anxiety or confusion, particularly in young children.
- Engage your child in games or other interesting activities instead.

Maintain a normal routine to the extent possible.

- Keep to a regular schedule, as this can be reassuring and promotes physical health.
- Encourage your children to keep up with their schoolwork and extracurricular activities, but don't push them if they seem overwhelmed.

Be honest and accurate.

- In the absence of factual information, children often imagine situations far worse than reality.
- Don't ignore their concerns, but rather explain that at the present moment very few people in this country are sick with COVID-19.
- Children can be told this disease is thought to be spread between people who are in close contact with one another—when an infected person coughs or sneezes.
- It is also thought it can be spread when you touch an infected surface or object, which is why it is so important to protect yourself.
- For additional factual information contact your school nurse, ask your doctor, or check the <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html> website.

Know the symptoms of COVID-19.

- The CDC believes these symptoms appear in a few days after being exposed to someone with the disease or as long as 14 days after exposure:
 - Fever
 - Cough
 - Shortness for breath
- For some people the symptoms are like having a cold; for others they are quite severe or even life threatening. In either case it is important to check with your child's healthcare provider (or yours) and follow instructions about staying home or away from public spaces to prevent the spread of the virus.

Review and model basic hygiene and healthy lifestyle practices for protection.

- Encourage your child to practice every day good hygiene—simple steps to prevent spread of illness:
 - Wash hands multiple times a day for at least 20 seconds (singing Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star slowly takes about 20 seconds).
 - Cover their mouths with a tissue when they sneeze or cough and throw away the tissue immediately, or sneeze or cough into the bend of their elbow. Do not share food or drinks.

- Practice giving fist or elbow bumps instead of handshakes. Fewer germs are spread this way.
- Giving children guidance on what they can do to prevent infection gives them a greater sense of control over disease spread and will help to reduce their anxiety.
- Encourage your child to eat a balanced diet, get enough sleep, and exercise regularly; this will help them develop a strong immune system to fight off illness.

Discuss new rules or practices at school.

- Many schools already enforce illness prevention habits, including frequent hand washing or use of alcohol-based hand cleansers.
- Your school nurse or principal will send information home about any new rules or practices.
- Be sure to discuss this with your child.
- Contact your school nurse with any specific questions.

Communicate with your school.

- Let your school know if your child is sick and keep them home. Your school may ask if your child has a fever or not. This information will help the school to know why your child was kept home. If your child is diagnosed with COVID-19, let the school know so they can communicate with and get guidance from local health authorities.
- Talk to your school nurse, school psychologist, school counselor, or school social worker if your child is having difficulties as a result of anxiety or stress related to COVID-19. They can give guidance and support to your child at school.
- *Make sure to follow all instructions from your school.*

Take Time to Talk

You know your children best. Let their questions be your guide as to how much information to provide. However, don't avoid giving them the information that health experts identify as critical to ensuring your children's health. Be patient; children and youth do not always talk about their concerns readily. Watch for clues that they may want to talk, such as hovering around while you do the dishes or yard work. It is very typical for younger children to ask a few questions, return to playing, then come back to ask more questions.

When sharing information, it is important make sure to provide facts without promoting a high level of stress, remind children that adults are working to address this concern, and give children actions they can take to protect themselves.

Information is rapidly changing about this new virus—to have the most correct information stay informed by accessing <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>.

Keep Explanations Age Appropriate

- Early elementary school children need brief, simple information that should balance COVID-19 facts with appropriate reassurances that their schools and homes are safe and that adults are there to help keep them healthy and to take care of them if they do get sick. Give simple examples of the steps people take every day to stop germs and stay healthy, such as washing hands. Use language such as “adults are working hard to keep you safe.”
- Upper elementary and early middle school children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what will happen if COVID-19 comes to their school or community. They may need assistance separating reality from rumor and fantasy. Discuss efforts of school and

community leaders to prevent germs from spreading.

- Upper middle school and high school students are able to discuss the issue in a more in-depth (adult-like) fashion and can be referred directly to appropriate sources of COVID-19 facts. Provide honest, accurate, and factual information about the current status of COVID-19. Having such knowledge can help them feel a sense of control.

Suggested Points to Emphasize When Talking to Children

- Adults at home and school are taking care of your health and safety. If you have concerns, please talk to an adult you trust.
- Not everyone will get the coronavirus (COVID-19) disease. School and health officials are being especially careful to make sure as few people as possible get sick.
- It is important that all students treat each other with respect and not jump to conclusions about who may or may not have COVID-19.
- There are things you can do to stay healthy and avoid spreading the disease:
 - Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
 - Stay home when you are sick.
 - Cover your cough or sneeze into your elbow or a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.
 - Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth.
 - Wash hands often with soap and water (20 seconds).
 - If you don't have soap, use hand sanitizer (60–95% alcohol based).
 - Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces using a regular household cleaning spray or wipe.

Additional Resources

Talking With Children: Tips for Caregivers, Parents, and Teachers During Infectious Disease Outbreaks, <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/Talking-With-Children-Tips-for-Caregivers-Parents-and-Teachers-During-Infectious-Disease-Outbreaks/SMA14-4886>

Coping With Stress During Infectious Disease Outbreaks, <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/Coping-with-Stress-During-Infectious-Disease-Outbreaks/sma14-4885>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/transmission.html>

Handwashing and Hand Sanitizer Use at Home, at Play, and Out and About, <https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/pdf/hand-sanitizer-factsheet.pdf>

For more information related to schools and physical and mental health, visit www.nasponline.org and www.nasn.org.

How to Talk to Your Kids About Coronavirus – PBS TK – Early Elementary

<https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/how-to-talk-to-your-kids-about-coronavirus>

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 heards” 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.