

How to talk to children about the coronavirus

Posted March 07, 2020, 10:30 am , Updated March 23, 2020, 12:09 pm



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Every news outlet seems to be talking nonstop about the new coronavirus, which is causing an illness called COVID-19. Many parents understandably are sharing concerns, too — at least among friends and families. Children are hearing about this new virus and registering that some adults seem worried.

Given all the discussion about this coronavirus, your children might have heard about it and have questions for you. Below are some tips on how to respond to their questions

Provide just enough information about the new coronavirus

Try to strike a balance between answering questions well enough without fueling the flame of anxiety. Children have elaborate imaginations that may lead them to create unnecessarily catastrophic stories in their minds if parents do not talk at all, or enough, about a topic like this. At the other end of the spectrum, providing too much information may create extra alarm.

So what can you do? Think about what your child absolutely needs to know to understand what the virus is and what to do about it.

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,

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.
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 - **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.

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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.

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.

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. Ask your doctor to recommend mental health professionals who practice 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.

