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Talking with Children About Coronavirus

March 23, 2020

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Even if your children are too young to know what a pandemic is, the growing disruption to their daily routine is sure to prompt difficult questions about an illness that the world is still trying to understand.

Dara Steinberg, PhD (<https://www.pediatrics.columbia.edu/profile/dara-m-steinberg-phd>), and Anthony Puliafico, PhD (<https://www.columbiapsychiatry.org/profile/anthony-puliafico-phd>), child psychologists at Columbia University Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons, offer some tips to help parents and other caregivers talk about COVID-19 with children.

When and how should we start a conversation about COVID-19 with children?

Even if people in your household are not talking directly about coronavirus or COVID-19, children have probably heard about it from friends, media, and social media.

“Children typically let you know when they are ready to talk about something, so once your child starts to ask questions, this is a good time to address it,” Steinberg says. “Use age-appropriate language and follow your child’s lead. Some children will want lots of details while others will not.”

“You may also want to ask where your child heard information about the virus, because it can help you determine how to respond,” Puliafico adds. “Assess your child’s understanding of the coronavirus. Kids may treat rumors about the coronavirus as facts, so it’s important to identify any misinformation that might make them more anxious.”

What if my child is worried about becoming sick?

It’s normal for children to worry, Steinberg says, particularly when those around them are worried.

“Simply telling children not to worry will not likely allay their fears. Acknowledge their concerns and tell them it’s normal to feel worried about getting sick,” Steinberg says. “Even if you choose to share your own concerns with your children, tell them how your family is handling the situation and reassure them that you will take care of them. Depending on the child’s age, you can also explain that many people are working to help those who are sick and prevent COVID-19 from spreading.”

Parents also need to refrain from engaging in behaviors that may fuel their children’s anxiety, Puliafico adds. “It’s important to model an appropriately calm response,” he says. “Using Purell much more than is needed or watching the news all day at home could send the wrong message to children.”

KIDS AND THE NEW NORMAL



What if children ask a question I can’t answer?

With so much uncertainty about the virus, it is almost inevitable that children will have questions that you can't answer. "It's fine if you don't have answers now but you can validate your child's questions," Steinberg says. "Explain that you wonder the same thing and that you can try to find the answer together."

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What's the best way to help myself and my family as COVID-19 disrupts our daily lives?

Steinberg and Puliafico stress the importance of establishing a daily routine and adhering to the family norms that guide schedules, activities, and behavior.

"Routines, even if they are unfamiliar or different, can help children and their families achieve a sense of normalcy during a time of unpredictability," Steinberg says. "More broadly, this includes the expectations and responsibilities that families have for their children, like when to wake up or go to bed, how to behave at mealtime, and chores."

Routines can also help children and families adjust to new tasks, such as more frequent hand washing, socializing with friends and family through FaceTime, and doing school work remotely.

"Repeating these tasks will make them seem more normal over time," Steinberg says.

"It may seem trivial to focus on these things in light of what's happening, but they can help restore a sense of order and calm to children and families facing new challenges."

Additional tips for achieving a sense of normalcy:

- Maintain a consistent wake-up time and bedtime, even when children aren't in school. Sticking to a normal sleep schedule can help prevent children from becoming anxious.
- Limit your child's screen time when not engaged in remote learning. Excessive screen time can interfere with other opportunities for learning and family time and disrupt

sleep if too close to bedtime.

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- Create a daily schedule and break the day into defined blocks of time for learning, meals, family, and fun.
- Help children stay connected to their friends, schoolmates, and family through correspondence, phone calls, email, or the internet.

“Ultimately, human beings are remarkably resilient,” Steinberg says, “and even the most trying situations become manageable with time. Following these guidelines early can help make this process a little easier.”

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