



TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT COVID-19: CONCRETE SUGGESTIONS FOR DIALOGUE

The Bottom Line

With increasing access to technology and social media for children, it is important to speak with them about COVID-19 to ensure they are receiving correct information. While children require age-appropriate information, it is also important to be open, direct, and honest to keep lines of communication open.

Strategies for Talking to Children about COVID-19

- Invite questions: Encourage asking questions to ensure they are being heard and are receiving fact-based information.
- Do not avoid questions: It is okay to answer questions with “I don’t know” and try to teach yourself and the child to be more comfortable with uncertainty.
- Be developmentally appropriate: Do not volunteer information, as this may overwhelm the child. Give ample opportunity to ask questions. It is easy to overestimate a child’s verbal abilities. Use simple language first to ensure the child understands.
- Take cues and set the tone: Invite the child to tell you what they have heard and what they would like to know. Challenge frightening and incorrect thoughts and filter them into age-appropriate facts.
- Acknowledge your own anxiety: If you are worried about a new piece of information, try to calm down before having a conversation with the child about it.
- Focus on safety: Reassure children that they are safe by reminding them what they can do to keep themselves safe (hand washing and physical distancing), and what you and others around them are doing to keep them safe.
- Keep the lines of communication open: Let the child know that once you know more, you will keep the child updated.

Dialogue Specific to Essential Service Providers With Children

While this dialogue is applicable to all caregivers, children being cared for by an essential service provider may be experiencing heightened anxiety knowing there is a greater possibility their caregiver may be exposed to COVID-19.

- “I know you’re worried about me getting sick and that’s OK. I agree it can feel scary sometimes for me too but I want you to know I am taking extra special care to stay safe and keep all of us safe too.”
- “I want you to remember that even if I do get sick this flu is mostly dangerous for older adults and people whose bodies have a tough time fighting off flus and other germs so I won’t feel good but I’ll be OK.”

Dialogue for All Caregivers

- “Right now, on the news and all around us, there is a lot of talk about this virus/people getting sick, what have you heard about it? Is there anything you want to know more about?”
- “I know we are watching a lot of news right now and I’d like to talk to you about any questions you may have or maybe something that’s hard to understand?”
- “Mom/Dad/Caregiver don’t have all the answers right now, but let’s talk about what I do know”
- “This is a serious flu that makes some people very sick. Most people are just fine even if they get sick, but it’s important to wash our hands and stay home while this flu goes around.”
- “Even if we’re not sick and your friends don’t feel sick it’s important that we work together to stop this flu from spreading, and that means we are not able to see our friends right now. But once this virus/flu goes away, then we can all hang out again.”

Dialogue Specific to Younger Children

To encourage hand washing and physical distancing, caregivers can make a game out of it. You can show them how much space we need between people by having them extend and swing their arms to make their “space bubble” while using words like “Don’t be a space invader”.

Strategies that work for general anxiety work here as well. Generate alternatives to worried thoughts using Realistic Thinking skills, such as asking your child what else could happen instead of their worried thought. Let the child know it is normal to be anxious. Give anxiety a name to help everyone see anxiety as separate from the child, such as Worry Bully, Mr. Worry or Worry Dragon. These names make sense, but are also not frightening to the child.

- "Doctors and scientists are studying to learn more about this virus so they can help us figure out the best way to beat it. So far we know that to help beat it we can wash our hands after we blow our noses, cough, sneeze, go to the bathroom, before we eat, or when we come home from being outside, But we need to wash them for at least twenty seconds so let's come up with a Hand-Washing Song together (easy to find kid versions on YouTube/Google) to help us learn how long we should be washing for."
- "I know I am reminding you to wash your hands a lot. Let's make this into a game. If I hear you singing our "Hand washing Song" that we've been practicing each time you wash your hands, we'll put a sticker on your chart. When you have x number of stickers you can choose a prize. Remember you only earn the sticker if you wash your hands when you need to, no stickers for extra washing when we don't need to wash. Can you remind me again when are the right times to wash our hands?"
- "Another thing that doctors are saying is that we need to be further away from people than we are used to, that's why we haven't been able to see Grandma and Grandpa as much. So instead, let's video call them so we can see how they are doing." – Following the videochat, you can say "See? Was Mr. Worry right or wrong – grandma/grandpa/etc. are just fine! That Mr. Worry just LOVES to make us worry more than we need to doesn't he!?"
- "Mom/Dad/Caregiver is worried about this virus too and it's OK to feel worried or anxious about things we don't understand, because a little worry helps keep us safe. But we don't want the worry to get too big because then the Worry Bully may take over"
- "It seems like Mr. Worry is trying to scare you about the virus/this serious flu, let's boss him back by making a list of the helpful worries and the ones that are not helpful."
- "Let's not think about what may happen in the future right now or spend too long focused on the Worry Dragon. Let's go and do a puzzle together (or some other activity in the present)"

- "It's important for us all to remember this isn't going to last forever and we'll be able to see and play with friends again – we just can't do that right now, but when the doctors say it's safe we can do all that fun stuff again."

Dialogue Specific to Older Children/Youth Having a Difficult Time With Social Restrictions

- "I know it's hard for you not to be able to see your friends or go places. It's hard for me too, I miss my friends and activities."
- "Let's focus on what we can do right now. We can (e.g., practice those math problems, do laundry together, put those photos in an album like we have been wanting to for so long but never had the time) or go and do something fun."
- "Let's stop watching the news or checking social media and instead let's (play a game together, bake, use it as an opportunity to catch up on our favourite series, go outside and make a snowman, throw around a ball etc)."



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