

Helping Children Cope Emotionally with the Coronavirus (COVID-19)

The airwaves are filled with information about the Coronavirus (COVID-19) and it is being spoken about at home, in school and almost all other venues to which children have access. This is a unique situation that leaves many parents questioning what to say to their children and how to address the possible emotional fallout from this concerning and anxiety-producing situation. The Academy is offering the following suggestions.

Children need to have relevant, factual and developmentally appropriate information.

Children are probably hearing many rumors, hypotheses and conjecture from peers, adults and the news media that can raise anxiety and worry. Clarify the information, dispel rumors, and realistically reassure them.

For example, children may hear that the elderly die from the virus. Some young children may believe that their mom and dad are elderly. They need to know that “elderly” means people 65 and over. Some children may believe that all elderly die from the virus. Children need to know that elderly people who are medically vulnerable are at greater risk but doesn’t mean that death is imminent. If children are worried about their grandparents, let them know that all safety precautions are being taken so they don’t get COVID-19.

Be careful not to provide too much information that the child does not understand. This can cause an increase in anxiety as they may interpret information incorrectly and perceive greater threat to themselves or others. Try to remain open to discussion about COVID-19. If children feel that you don’t want to discuss it, they may perceive the subject as taboo and experience greater anxiety.

Parents should limit children’s access to online and television news media.

If children have ongoing access to information through these sources, parents have little control of what children are hearing. They likely will have a limited ability to differentiate between individuals who are offering their opinion and those who are offering more factual information. They may take it as all being fact, which will increase anxiety and lead to more catastrophic thinking.

Remain sensitive to your children’s moods and behavior and any changes that take place. Certain children tend to internalize their thoughts and feelings, while others act out their anxieties. If you see visible changes in your child, encourage them to express their concerns so you can clarify and provide appropriate information and reassurance. Your child knowing that you are sensitive to their concerns, willing to discuss them and are available to them both physically and emotionally, goes a long way in decreasing anxieties and negative thinking.

Reassure your children about your own safety, the safety of the family and their safety.

To children their family is their world, especially younger children. It would help to reduce anxieties if they were reassured that everyone will be fine, even if they get the virus. Let them know the facts - that for people your age and other family member’s ages, the symptoms are like a cold or flu and the illness usually lasts about 10 days.

Continue to have as much structure in the day.

Life as your children know it has been disrupted probably more than any other time in their lives. They may not be attending school and other activities. If they are sports fans, sporting events have been cancelled or postponed. They may not be seeing friends. They may be staying at home more. The more structure that can be instilled in the day, the better. For example, if a child is home from school, have them complete academic activities during usual school hours. If they have a favorite show, allow them to watch it. If you have dinner at a certain time, continue to do so. If they go to sleep at nine on school nights, continue the usual bedtime as if there were school the next day. Structure decreases anxiety, so the more structure you can keep, the better.

Provide children with strategies that decrease the chances of getting the virus.

Inform your children of the Center for Disease Control's recommendations on what safety steps can be taken to lessen the spread of the virus (e.g., washing hands frequently, using wipes to clean surfaces, not congregating in large groups, keeping distance from others (social distancing), using appropriate means to cover mouth when coughing or sneezing. This will offer children a sense of control over the transmission of the virus.

Be aware of you own responses to COVID-19.

Children take their cues from their parents. Try to be mindful of how you are emotionally experiencing COVID-19 and how you are coming across to your children. Speak to a friend, spouse or other trusted persons to address your concerns and anxieties. Don't wait to feel overwhelmed by your concerns to speak to others. Having ongoing dialogue with others will help you with your own anxieties and in not feeling you are alone in your concerns.

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<https://www.aaets.org/helping-children-cope-emotionally-with-coronavirus>

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