



Employee Assistance Program

How to Talk to Children and Teens about the Coronavirus

Even if children and teens do not appear to be following the virus news carefully, it is likely that they are absorbing the information and stress from adults. They are hearing about it from teachers, siblings, friends and the media and making their own inferences about what it all means. As parents, you play an important role in helping children and teens better understand what is happening and helping them manage their own related worries or anxiety. Below are some tips that can help them keep stress at bay and manage emotions related to the pandemic.

Talking to Toddlers and Young Children

Even though toddlers and young children may not know what is going on, they may pick up a parent's worry and anxiety with their "sixth sense." Preschoolers may be more tuned in to what is happening. They may have questions about germs, doctors, and even death. School-age children will be more aware of what is going on. They have probably had discussions at school and with friends.

Provide Reassurance

- Reassure them that adults are in charge and working to keep people safe, healthy and secure. Try to maintain a sense of calm and control.
- Provide extra reassurance and time together.

Be the Source of Information and Encourage Open Communication

- Engage in age appropriate communication to address concerns about their health and the health of parents, relatives and friends. Offer reassurance that everyone is doing what they can to stay healthy and take care of others.
- Look for non-verbal signs of worry or anxiety. Do not talk about it unless they show signs of distress or ask questions.
- Ask them if they have any questions. If they do, stick to the facts and tell them what you know without exaggerating or overreacting.

Keep Healthy Routines

- Make efforts to maintain your children's normal routines and rituals when possible. If school, daycare or events are canceled, try to create and stick to other routines when you can. Explain that this is part of the precautions grown-ups are taking to prevent people from getting sick.
- Remind them that they can stay healthy by washing hands and make hand-washing fun with songs.
- Identify activities children can do to be helpful from hand washing to writing letters to nursing homes.

Limit Exposure to Stressors

- Children this age will be more interested in what might happen in the future. Stick to the facts and don't burden them with your own anxiety.
- Eliminate or limit exposure to media depending on the age of the child.
- Don't be surprised if they are more irritable and touchy. Be extra patient. Some children may act out scary feelings through misbehavior. Others may become more withdrawn. Pay attention to these cues and ask them to tell you about their feelings.

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Talking to Pre-teens and Teens

Children in these age groups will likely be very aware of what is going on. They have seen news coverage and discussed the virus at school, with teachers or friends. Talk to your children and answer any questions. This will help you determine how much they know and may help you correct any misinformation they might have. They might have fears about what this will mean for their own health, schooling, schedule or safety.

Empower your Teen

- Help guide your teen's worry into things they can do – like learning more about how to prevent the spread of the virus including washing hands, healthy eating and getting enough sleep.

Adjust your Communication Style to Accommodate your Teen... and Listen

- Some teens may want to block out the whole thing. It may appear that they do not care. This might be masking real worries. Ask questions and be ready to listen.
- Others may make jokes. Humor can be a way to help them cope, but discourage them from using humor as the only way to talk about the virus.
- Stick to the facts in your conversations and talk to your teens about what they see on TV or read online. Point them towards reliable sources of information like the CDC or WHO websites.

Provide Guidance about Information Available

- Talk through the difference between going online to get informed versus media over-use that can fuel anxiety.
- Enforce a tech curfew at night and encourage them to take media breaks.
- Some teens may be very interested in discussing the political or economic implications of the pandemic. For ideas, check out "[Coronavirus Resources: Teaching, Learning and Thinking Critically](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/11/learning/coronavirus-resources-teaching-learning-and-thinking-critically.html)".
- Seek out positive media. Watch, read and share stories about ways people are responding to the virus in collaborative ways to keep communities safe.

For more information or to access other resources available you may contact your Employee Assistance Program. Your EAP is available 24/7/365 by calling your designated toll free number or by logging onto www.eaphelplink.com and entering your company code.

Reference: Walsh, Erin, M.A. and Wash, David, PhD. How to Talk to Kids and Teens about the Coronavirus.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/smart-parenting-smarter-kids/202003/how-talk-kids-and-teens-about-the-coronavirus>

Reference: Schulten, Katherine. Coronavirus Resources: Teaching, Learning and Thinking Critically.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/11/learning/coronavirus-resources-teaching-learning-and-thinking-critically.html>.



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