

Tips on talking to your kids about COVID-19

By Drs. Katie Riewe and Kate Doyle

We are all now about 10 days into what has become our new temporary reality and our children of all ages are no doubt noticing that things are very different too. Kids are both smart and observant. They have been listening to your conversations, the news, the radio and friends/neighbors' comments. They can feel stress and anxiety within the home, even if it is not discussed. As with any tough topic, it is important to address COVID-19 with your child honestly and in an age appropriate manner in order to help them understand what is going on, process their feelings and provide a safe space for them to be emotional and vulnerable.

Being honest with kids is critical in this situation. It is important to validate their fears rather than saying, "Oh that is silly. It's nothing to worry about." Telling the truth will help in gaining a child's trust and also in making them feel safe. Based on your child's age, less or more details may be required. You do not need to offer more information than your child demands. You can initiate the conversation by asking them what they have heard, what they have noticed that has been different over the past couple weeks or what their current understanding is about the state of the world. By asking them their understanding, you can figure out how much your child knows and have the opportunity to correct any misinformation or misunderstandings.

Before talking to your child(ren), check your own emotional state. As a caregiver, it is important to be reassuring and provide comfort in a time of chaos. Try to speak softly and remain calm so that your child will feel more at ease. That being said, it is okay to share your feelings with your children. If you verbalize your fears then your child may be more likely to share their fears.

It may be helpful to consider conversations about COVID-19 in general age categories, though certain principles can apply across age groups. We have included some personal observations and anecdotes that seemed relevant as well.

Young toddlers:

The bad news: you have a young toddler in quarantine. The good news: they are unlikely to have specific long-term memories of this time. Try to maintain your sanity as well as some general routines including playtime and naptime, but in terms of major coronavirus explanations, you are off the hook!

Preschool:

Preschoolers will certainly notice that something is up and may have a lot of questions. They have a poor understanding of time frames and do not have much patience. To start you might say something like, "There is a type of germ called a virus that can make people sick and we need to stay home to help keep everyone safe and healthy."

From Dr. Doyle: When explaining COVID-19 to my four-year-old son, I explained that I was feeling sad because I am worried about his grandparents getting sick from the virus. My son immediately asked if everyone could get sick. I responded that everyone could get a cold, but kids usually don't get very sick. I then followed that statement by exclaiming, "Isn't it so great that kids like you and your sister don't get really sick? You guys have a superpower against the virus that adults don't have. Did you know you had

that superpower?” He was very excited and compared himself to Batman. It may be a stretch, but it was a context which allowed him to understand.

Watch for cues in their moods and behavior. For example, when my son woke up this morning very moody at the breakfast table, I named the situation by saying calmly, “Wow, Colin. You seem very upset this morning. What is bothering you?” He looked at me and asked, “Mommy, is the virus gone yet?” I explained the virus is an illness that will take weeks to go away. He started to cry because he really wanted to go to school to see his friends. I normalized his feelings by saying that all kids probably feel the same way. The solution we came up with was to facetime some friends from his preschool class. It wasn’t a perfect solution, but it definitely lifted his spirits. His mood changed after the call and I could tell he felt a little bit better knowing other kids also missed their friends and school.

School Age:

The following link has a cartoon that may be particularly helpful in explaining COVID-19 to your school age children. <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/02/28/809580453/just-for-kids-a-comic-exploring-the-new-coronavirus> This age group can understand the basic idea of a virus and getting sick and some of the steps necessary to keep everybody healthy.

School age kids are definitely now feeling the effects of not being in school. They miss their friends and their teachers and activities. It is important to remain hopeful and adamant that the world will get back to normal. Kids might press for a specific timeline. Counseling that no one knows for certain, but it is likely 1-2 months at least will help give a ballpark answer. Brainstorming a list of things to do when restrictions are lifted could be a fun way to acknowledge this will not last forever. If a child’s birthday party must be postponed, emphasize how much fun it will be because everyone will be so excited to get together. Shop for decorations or party favors online, or even make some homemade decorations.

Sometimes the most honest answers acknowledge a parent’s lack of information. If your child asks you a question for which you don’t the answer, tell them you will look up the answer. You can even research the answer together. Avoid news websites that can be alarming and have scary headlines about death and suffering. Use websites like the WHO and CDC to get facts. Reassure kids that doctors and scientists are working hard to help people sick with COVID-19 and to find a vaccine to prevent it.

Find silver linings in the conversation. Stress how lucky the child is for their many fortunes- like a home to keep them safe, a parent to help them with homeschooling, a freezer full of food, books to read and a strong heart to keep them healthy.

Teenagers:

Developmentally, this age group is likely to understand the most about what is going on. They are also the most likely to have access to the internet and the news, information and misinformation that is present.

From Dr. Riewe: Both in my home and in discussion with friends there seem to be some common ways that adolescents are dealing with the current reality. One is by denying the situation, talking about being back to activities in a sooner time frame than is likely. For example, my son just mentioned to me that he probably wouldn’t be able to attend the Bar Mitzvah he was invited to this weekend (I had just assumed he knew it was cancelled). Many high school seniors may not yet have digested the fact that

senior rites of passage may be postponed or cancelled. Others may be more emotional than usual and/or try to hide their emotions (such as crying in their bedroom).

Talking to teenagers is difficult even in good times. (I am often told what I say is “cringe-y”). But try to at least offer them the chance to talk. Ask them what questions they have. Share some of your basic thoughts. You might say, “Being stuck at home is really hard. I miss seeing our friends and going to our favorite restaurant. How are you doing?” Let them know that they can come to you if they have questions, in particular if they see or hear things online that are scary or that they wonder about. Ask them what their friends are saying and how their friends are doing. If they will let you, give them a hug. That physical presence can sometimes say more than words, even if it is “cringe-y”.

For all children, they should understand that COVID-19 is nobody’s “fault” and that no particular group, ethnic or otherwise is more susceptible to it. There have been reports of racist remarks or behaviors and even physical assaults against Asian people nationwide and locally. Please do your part to ensure your children understand that there is no place for this behavior.

Being a caretaker is an enormous responsibility. It can be very daunting, especially in situations where we are also fearful and stressed. Remember your child looks to you for guidance, love and clarity. You know your child best and you know what they need to hear to feel safe. Trust yourself and your parental instincts to guide this discussion with your child. If you have multiple children, please be prepared to have very different types of conversations with each of them depending on their specific needs and concerns. If you have any further questions or would like further tips, please visit the websites below. If you are worried about your child’s response to your conversation regarding COVID-19 or have any concerns about their mental health, please reach out to your pediatrician at PNP to discuss his/her symptoms and provide further resources.

USEFUL LINKS WITH SPECIFIC “TALKING POINTS”:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/talking-with-children.html>

<https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/how-to-talk-to-your-kids-about-coronavirus>

<https://childmind.org/article/talking-to-kids-about-the-coronavirus/>