

Talking with children about COVID-19

A Guide for parents, school staff, and others working with children

As media reports, social media and public conversations around COVID-19 increase, children may become more anxious or worried about themselves, their family, and friends becoming ill. Parents/Guardians, school staff, and other trusted adults play an important role in reducing the anxiety of children by sharing information about COVID-19 in an honest and accurate manner.

Also concerning is the instant and wide-spread discontinuation of all leisure and extra-curricular activities, as well as a reduction in social contact for children and adults alike. This dramatic change in social activity, paired with the suspension of classroom learning, may cause an increase in feelings of sadness and depression, in addition to feelings of anxiety related to the disease itself.

It is important for adults to have conversations with children about COVID-19, ways they can protect themselves and others from getting and spreading the disease, and ways to support their mental health in this time of change and uncertainty.

Guidelines for Talking with Children:

Remain calm and reassuring

- ◆ Children will react to both what is said and how it is said. If you notice you are feeling anxious, take some time to find your own calm before having a conversation with children.

Recognizing emotions

- ◆ Children may have a wide variety of emotions in response to COVID-19. It is important to acknowledge and accept any feelings that arise during this time.

Make yourself available to listen and talk

- ◆ Be sure children know they can come to you with any questions they may have. Invite children to tell you anything they may have heard about COVID-19 and to ask any questions they may have. Be prepared to answer any questions and avoid encouraging any frightening fantasies.

Avoid language that might blame others and may lead to stigma

- ◆ Avoid making assumptions about who may have COVID-19, as viruses can make anyone sick, regardless of a person's race or ethnicity.

Monitor what children see or hear through media and social media

- ◆ Consider reducing the amount of screen time focused on COVID-19 for children and adults. Too much focus on one topic can build anxiety.

Provide information that is honest and accurate

- ◆ Give children truthful and fact-based information that is appropriate for their age and developmental stage.
- ◆ Remind children that not everything on the Internet and social media is accurate.
- ◆ It's okay if you cannot answer every concern; being available to children is what matters.

Focus on everyday safety precautions to stay safe

- ◆ An important way to reassure kids is to remind them of what they can do and what is in their control.
- ◆ Since COVID-19 is transmitted mostly by coughing and touching surfaces, remind children that they are taking care of themselves by thoroughly washing their hands with soap and water for 20 seconds (the length of two "Happy Birthday" songs) when they come in from outside, before they eat or prepare food, after blowing their nose, coughing, sneezing, or going to the bathroom.
- ◆ If soap and water is not available, teach them to use hand sanitizer (containing at least 60% alcohol). Young children may need supervision when using hand sanitizer.
- ◆ Remind children to cough or sneeze into a tissue or their elbow, then throw the tissue out and wash their hands.

Stick to routine

- ◆ Uncertainty may build anxiety. Staying rooted to routines and predictability is essential.
- ◆ Structured days with regular mealtimes, academic/work time, free play time, and bedtime are an important part of supporting the positive mental health of both children and adults.
- ◆ Consider creating a daily visual schedule with some flexibility for choice activities.

Support healthy social activities

- ◆ Teach children what is meant by *social distancing* (deliberately increasing the physical space between people to avoid spreading illness) and how this relates to the suspension of classroom learning and the cancellation of leisure and extra-curricular activities.
- ◆ Encourage kids to visit loved ones and friends by electronic devices instead of in person. Writing letters to be mailed or dropped off to friends and family may also be an option.

Keep talking

- ◆ Reassure kids that you will continue to keep them updated as you learn more and that they can come to you with any new questions they may have.