

How to Talk to Kids About Coronavirus

Keeping your own anxiety in check is key.



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- Published March 17, 2020 Updated March 19, 2020

By now, your children may have heard about the new coronavirus, whether it's from a snippet of a news briefing or from other kids at school. They may have family members who have been quarantined here because of recent international travel, or they may even know someone who is sick. "My patients are scared," said Dr. Nia Heard-Garris, M.D., an attending physician at the Ann and Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago.

So what should you tell kids about the coronavirus, and how? We spoke to a pediatrician, two psychologists, a pediatric infectious disease specialist and a safety expert for their best tips.

Assess what your child knows

Dr. Heard-Garris said that you should start the conversation by asking what your child has heard about the virus. If they've heard that people all over the world are dying, and the Grim Reaper is coming for us, too, that's a very different conversation than if they've just heard it's like [the flu](#), Dr. Heard-Garris said.

If your child is under 6 and has not heard about the virus yet, you may not want to bring it up, as it may introduce unnecessary anxiety, said Abi Gewirtz, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and professor at the University of Minnesota, and the author of the forthcoming book "When the World Feels Like a Scary Place: Essential Conversations for Anxious Parents and Worried Kids."

Process your own anxiety first

Make sure "you're not panicking in their presence around the topic," said Dunya Poltorak, Ph.D., a pediatric medical psychologist in private practice in Birmingham, Mich. "Your demeanor is going to stir this massive pot of anxiety." So try to process any fears you may have before you talk to your children, whether it's by talking to a friend, a partner or a therapist. "We don't want our children to feel like the world is so scary," said Dr. Gewirtz, because that might keep them from being curious and engaged.

Don't dismiss your child's fears

If your child is afraid because some kid on the bus told him he might die, that's a real fear and you should take it seriously, Dr. Gewirtz said. If you simply tell the child, "You'll be fine," they might not feel heard. "Listen to them and track what the child is feeling," she said. You can say something in a calm voice like, "That sounds pretty scary, I can see it in your face." You can also relay an anecdote from your own childhood about a time when you were scared. Then, after the child has calmed down, perhaps over dinner, you can bring up coronavirus again.

Talk at an age-appropriate level

If you are talking to your young child about the virus, you can say something like, "There's lots of different viruses, like when your tummy hurts, or sometimes when you have a bad cold. Coronavirus is another type of virus," Dr. Poltorak said.

Depending on how old your child is and how much they know, you might also say something like, "This illness is different than a cold because it's new, but people are trying really hard to make sure it doesn't spread, and they treat people who are sick. If you ever have questions, talk to me," Dr. Heard-Garris said. You can also say, "Scientists and really smart people all around the world are trying to figure out how to keep people safe and healthy."

Emphasize good hygiene

Make sure your kids are washing their hands for at least 20 seconds before and after meals, after they go to the bathroom, after they come in from outside and after they've blown their nose or put their hands in their mouth, said Dr. Rebecca Pellett Madan, M.D., a pediatric infectious disease specialist at N.Y.U. Langone's Hassenfeld Children's Hospital.

Children should sing "Happy Birthday" twice to know how long to wash their hands, and then make sure they are drying them thoroughly. Hand sanitizers may be less effective for small children, Dr. Madan said, because they need to evaporate fully to kill all the germs, and little kids may be rushing off to touch toys or other kids before the sanitizer has dried. For people of all ages, hand washing is preferable to hand sanitizer, though sanitizer is a decent option if hand washing is not possible.

Several experts recommended making hand washing into a game. "You can even make it into a competition," said Judith Matloff, who teaches conflict reporting at Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and is the author of the upcoming book "How to Drag a Body and Other Safety Tips You Hope to Never Need: Survival Tricks for Hacking, Hurricanes and Hazards Life Might Throw at You." Compete with your kids to see who can wash their hands the longest, or who can make the suds the biggest.

If you have a little nose picker, Dr. Madan suggested saying something like, "Do you remember when your friend was out sick last week? Being sick is part of being human, but when you're picking your nose, you can get boogers on your fingers and they can spread germs to your friends." She also recommended an episode of the show "Ask the StoryBots" on

Netflix called “How Do People Catch a Cold?” for an age-appropriate explanation for little kids about how germs work.

Frame school closures as a positive

Dr. Poltorak recommended saying something like, “There’s lots of icky bugs going around and we’re going to hang tight at home so they can clean the schools out.” Try to frame it as a positive — more time at home where we can have fun! — rather than something to fear, especially among the youngest children. Matloff also suggested preparing now for potential closures by shopping for new games, books and arts and crafts supplies.

Try to maintain a routine as much as you possibly can. Rebecca Kanthor, a Shanghai-based reporter, wrote a piece for us about what life is like under coronavirus quarantine in China. In addition to keeping a routine, experts recommend making sure your kids get enough exercise. Matloff suggested having your kids keep a quarantine journal, where they can write or draw their thoughts and experiences, which can help keep them occupied and process their anxiety.

Finally, several experts recommended that you try to enjoy the time together as much as you can, without losing your mind. “With few distractions, I’m reminded how much I should cherish these moments together,” Kanthor wrote. “I will, I promise — after I’m done hiding out in the bathroom.”