Talking to Kids about COVID-19

Children might be having a hard time understanding what is going on in the world right now. They can be particularly vulnerable to feelings of anxiety, fear, and stress. But having an open, supportive discussion with your children can help them understand, cope and even make a positive contribution for others.
Below are eight tips on how to protect and comfort your child.
Adapted from UNICEF

1. Ask Open Questions and Listen

Start by inviting your child to talk about the issue. Find out how much they already know and follow their lead. Make sure you are in a safe environment and allow your child to talk freely. Drawing, stories, and other activities may help to open up a discussion. Most importantly, don't minimize or avoid their concerns. Be sure to acknowledge their feelings and assure them that it's natural to feel scared about these things. Demonstrate that you're listening by giving them your full attention, and make sure they understand that they can talk to you whenever they like.

2. Be Honest and Explain the Truth in a Child-friendly Way

Children have a right to truthful information about what's going on in the world, but adults also have a responsibility to keep them safe from distress. Use age-appropriate language, watch their reactions, and be sensitive to their level of anxiety. If you can't answer their questions, don't guess. Use it as an opportunity to explore the answers together. Explain that some information online isn't accurate, and that it's best to trust the experts.

3. Show Them How to Protect Themselves

One of the best ways to keep children safe from coronavirus and other diseases is to simply encourage regular hand-washing. It doesn't need to be a scary conversation. You can also show children how to cover a cough or a sneeze with their elbow, explain that it's best not to get too close to people who have those symptoms, and ask them to tell you if they start to feel like they have a fever, cough, or are having difficulty breathing.

4. Offer Reassurance

When we're seeing lots of troubling images on TV or online, it can sometimes feel like the crisis is all around us. Children may not distinguish between images on screen and their own personal reality, and they may believe they're in imminent danger. You can help your children cope with the stress by making opportunities for them to play and relax, when possible. Keep regular routines and schedules as much as possible, especially before they go to sleep, or help create new ones in a new environment. If you are experiencing an outbreak in your area, remind your children that they are not likely to catch the disease, that most people who do have coronavirus don't get very sick, and that lots of adults are working hard to keep your family safe. If your child does feel unwell, explain that they have to stay at home/at the hospital because it is safer for them and their friends. Reassure them that you know it is hard (maybe scary or even boring) at times, but that following the rules will help keep everyone safe.

5 Check If They are Experiencing or Spreading Stigma

The outbreak of coronavirus has brought with it numerous reports of racial discrimination around the world, so it's important to check that your children are neither experiencing nor contributing to bullying. Explain that coronavirus has nothing to do with what someone looks like, where they are from, or what language they speak. If they have been called names or bullied at school, they should feel comfortable telling an adult whom they trust. Remind your children that everyone deserves to be safe at school. Bullying is always wrong and we should each do our part to spread kindness and support each other.

6 Look for Helpers

It's important for children to know that people are helping each other with acts of kindness and generosity. Share stories of health workers, scientists, and young people, among others, who are working to stop the outbreak and keep the community safe. It can be a big comfort to know that compassionate people are taking action.

7 Take Care of Yourself

You'll be able to help your kids better if you're coping, too. Children will pick up on your own response to the news, so it helps them to know you're calm and in control. If you're feeling anxious or upset, take time for yourself and reach out to other family, friends and trusted people in your community. Make some time to do things that help you relax and recuperate. Remember, too, that you are modeling how to cope with stressful situations which can help your children now and in the future.

8 Close Conversations with Care

It's important to know that we're not leaving children in a state of distress. As your conversation wraps up, try to gauge their level of anxiety by watching their body language, considering whether they're using their usual tone of voice, and watching their breathing. Remind your children that they can have other difficult conversations with you at any time. Remind them that you care, you're listening, and that you're available whenever they're feeling worried.

Other helpful resources for talking to your kids about COVID-19:
- ZERO to THREE
- PBS Kids for Parents
- Sesame Street: Caring for Each Other
- Birth to Five Helpline
- Child Mind Institute's Video on How to Talk to Kids about COVID-19

Need to talk to someone?
Call our Helpline at (602) 279-2900 or chat with us at www.acesdv.org/helpline

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