



How to talk to kids about COVID – 19

By Susan Menchinton RECE

- 1. Ask what they know already.** This helps you know if they have wrong information, and to sort out where their fears lie.
- 2. Don't offer MORE than they ask.** When they ask why they have to wash their hands so much, say “This helps keep the germs away, and that’s important right now”, instead of a detailed description of vectors of infection.
- 3. Answer their questions right away (and be prepared for the same ones to come up again).** Children will test whether you are being truthful with them by asking key questions again and again. Be consistent in your answers and ask adults around you to be on the same page with you.
- 4. Use age-appropriate, simple language and answer in a straightforward manner.** “The daycare is closed and I’m staying home from work so that we can make sure that the sick people can get the help they need”.
- 5. If you’re working outside home, reassure them that you’re safe while gone and they will be safe where they are.** If possible, try to connect with them by phone or video chat more often than normal if your child seems to need this.

- 6. Watch for signs of self-blame.** Children sometimes internalise traumatic events and blame themselves for anything that bothers family members – make sure to tell them that nobody did anything wrong.
- 7. Tell them when you don't know something.** It's important that children see their trusted adults acknowledge uncertainty. Help them understand that life is sometimes uncertain and although we don't know the answers to everything, we are all working together to get through this.
- 8. Reassure them and keep calm yourself, even if you don't feel like you can.** Children are sponges and soak up the atmosphere around them. Don't share your fears and concerns within their hearing, although it is important to share these feelings with adults you trust. Children check in with adults to see how they handle the unknown – this is called Social Referencing. Be the calm turtle swimming through stormy seas.
- 9. Don't dismiss extreme thoughts and fears, like "Everyone is going to die!!"** Realise that they are afraid and ask them to talk about it. Gently challenging wrong information helps your child know that you're willing to think things through with them, not just issue commands, like "Don't be silly!". Try these questions:
 - "Why do you think that?"
 - "Where did you hear that? Do you want to talk about it? I want to help you."
- 10. Prepare kids for likely events, not catastrophe:** "No, I don't think Ana's birthday party will happen next week. Let's do a card to send her or do a video chat", not "I don't know when parties will be allowed again"

11. Limit kids' exposure to continual updates from TV and social media. If you have a constant stream of updates going on in the background, children (and you too) will live in low-grade anxiety all day. Cut back their access and make time to disengage with them.

12. Advice about Tweens and Teens: Children in this age-grouping are often outwardly dismissive of parents and what they have to say. This is a natural phase they pass through, as they work on critical processing skills and prepare to be in charge of their own lives.

Your best strategy is to keep any information you need to share with them simple and direct. Although they may usually have more freedom, you may have to establish new safety rules about getting together with friends / going out in public. Some of this may not be negotiable, and you'll have to live with possible sulks, if your tween or teen doesn't agree with you. Remember, this will pass, and hold firm to the precautions you set.

Even if they normally don't spend a lot of time sharing with you, keep telling them that you're ready to talk at any time they need to about the COVID – 19 outbreak, or anything else that's troubling them. That usually means they'll wake you up at 1 am for an urgent discussion but try to welcome that.

REMEMBER: STAY SAFE AND BE WELL!

- Susan M.