

Talking with Our Kids About Coronavirus

By Trent Everett, Ph.D.



How should we talk with children about the coronavirus (COVID 19)? With the abundance of news coverage, social media exposure, and conversations, it's almost certain kids who are school age and older have been exposed to this topic.

How parents respond to the current situation can have a significant effect on how children handle it, and most of the time your children will follow the response you model. If you are watching the news and your kids are around, they are absorbing the same information as you, except they don't have adult emotional and reasoning systems to handle the information. In an emotionally charged atmosphere, children are generally very sensitive to what surrounds them and are directly influenced by the way their parents feel. Therefore, if you are worried about something, your child is likely to be worried, too.

As a parent, it's important to overcome your own anxieties to help your children face theirs. With coronavirus, keep things in perspective. Take a deep breath and remind yourself that the number of confirmed infections and loss of life in the U.S. are low, especially in comparison to other flu viruses. The fact that there is a great deal of news coverage on this issue does not necessarily mean that it presents a threat to you or your family. The probability of any family contracting COVID 19 is extremely low. Take the precautions you feel are necessary and maintain routines, social connections and activities to provide a sense of stability.

The way we address this issue with our kids is age dependent. If a child expresses concern, parents should offer reassurance they're doing everything possible to keep the family healthy and safe. At any age, if your child is worried, find out what they've heard or think they know, then correct misinformation. Until around age 7, only address potentially frightening details if kids bring them up first. Respond in age-appropriate language and keep your answers short and concrete. Younger children need to be reassured that this won't happen to them. Parents may feel like they're lying, since no one can ever be 100% sure of what the future holds, but probability estimates are not something small children can grasp and won't comfort them. Explain what they need to do to remain safe, such as washing hands and sneezing or coughing into their sleeves. With older children and teens, be honest and authentic. Talk to them about the statistics and stress the importance of hygiene. Assure them that some of the most skilled and intelligent people in the world are working collaboratively to address this illness. Explain that it is highly unlikely to affect them because they are under 20 years-old and, up to this point, there has only been one death of someone this age. By far, the most deaths have occurred to older people with compromised immune systems. The vast majority of people recover fully, often having mild or even no symptoms, including most of the older people. This information can be reassuring if they are concerned about older family members, such as grandparents.

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An important first step for parents, teachers and other adults is gathering information. What are the facts we currently have as opposed to the media hype, the over or under reaction of others, assumptions, rumors and mythology growing around this topic? For example, Human Coronaviruses are a family of viruses that typically cause mild to moderate illness like the common cold. Almost everyone gets infected with one of these viruses at some point in their lives, and usually the illness only lasts a short amount of time. It is important to stay well-informed with reliable information, such as that provided by the Center for Disease Control at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>.

In some cases, children and/or their parents may experience more significant levels of anxiety, sadness and uncertainty. In situations where these heightened emotional responses begin to adversely affect work, school, relationships or physical functioning such as sleep, it may be helpful to consult with a mental health professional. The clinicians at The Conative Group are prepared and committed to provide the understanding, skills and support to help families and individuals more successfully navigate these challenging circumstances.

Symptoms of Coronavirus

People with confirmed cases of the COVID 19 reported illnesses ranging from mild to severe. Symptoms are similar to the flu and can include:

- Fever
- Cough
- Shortness of breath
- Body aches
- Tiredness
- Sore throat
- Headache
- Diarrhea
- Pneumonia

Preventing Coronavirus

The best way to prevent infection is to avoid being exposed to this virus. However, here are a few other ways you can keep your family and others healthy and help prevent the spread of Corona and other viruses. Standard, healthy practices include:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Keep your kids away from others who are sick or keep them home if they are ill.
- Teach kids to cough and sneeze into their arm or elbow, not their hands.
- Clean and disinfect household objects and surfaces in your home.
- If you or your children are ill, stay home from work or school.

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