

WHAT PARENTS AND TEACHERS NEED TO KNOW

How to Talk
to Children
and Teens
about...

COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

In this disturbing and frightening time, a virus that human beings have not seen before is now infecting millions of people all over the globe. The coronavirus (also known as COVID-19) causes serious illness and possible death in adults, teens, children, and infants. To prevent the spread of the virus, national and local health professionals and government leaders have taken unprecedented steps, such as closing schools; insisting that people practice “social distancing,” or maintaining at least six feet between one person and another; and encouraging people to stay home and—if they need to leave their homes—to wear masks in public. For people of faith, the closure of churches to congregants, especially during the holy seasons of Lent, Holy Week, and Easter, seemed to be the harshest measure of all. Just when we need God and each other the most, we cannot gather as families of faith.

If this is difficult for adults to fathom, it is nearly impossible for children and teens to understand. Although they may have initially experienced joy at the

thought of time off from school, as the days go by, they wonder if they will ever see schoolmates or teachers again or if they will ever again get to play sports with their teammates. Many of these young people who had expected proms and graduation ceremonies to conclude their high school years realize that events they had so eagerly anticipated will not occur.

This booklet is meant to help you communicate about this worldwide tragedy to the children and teens in your life. Each chapter will focus on a different aspect of the pandemic, starting with background information suitable for adults and most teens, and followed by suggestions on how to talk about the chapter's information to young people of different ages.

- Chapter 1 will discuss some of the science behind this infection and why certain measures are recommended.
- Chapter 2 will focus on the various reactions that children, teens, and adults might demonstrate.
- Chapter 3 will reflect on why bad things happen and what role God plays in tragedies.

- Chapter 4 will offer suggestions for building resiliency in uncertain times. Age-appropriate activities will also be proposed to help children and teens explore their own reactions and to consider what they might be able to do for others during this time.

As people become ill and die, individuals lose their jobs, and stores and small businesses close, this pandemic has already wreaked havoc worldwide and will continue to do so until a cure, robust therapies to alleviate symptoms, or a vaccine are in place. These may be many months away, and we have to live in the present time. As adults, we can model positive behaviors to the young people in our care, even in the midst of our own uncertainty, fear, and suffering. This pandemic can be a time of emotional and spiritual growth for us all, but that will only happen if we choose growth rather than denial.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONVERSATIONS WITH A YOUNG PERSON OF ANY AGE

- Always ask if he or she has particular questions, and welcome any questions as they arise. (See appendix for suggestions on answering particular questions.) No question should be off-limits.
- Answer to the best of your ability, but do not pretend to know what you don't know. It is better to say "I don't know" than to say something that is wrong. You and your child or teen can always try to look up an answer.
- Use language that the child or teen understands; clarify terms, as needed.
- Be sure to find out what the child or teen thinks. Listen carefully to his or her perspectives. This shows respect and also helps you to discover misinformation, thus giving you the opportunity to correct it.
- Ask thoughtful questions of your child or teen to gauge how he or she is doing. Even in the same family, children and teens of different ages often have vastly divergent reactions and responses.
- Commiserate with any feelings of fear or frustration (even confusion about why God doesn't stop the virus) that he or she may voice; this situation is hard for most people, young and old.
- Watch your own language and your behaviors. Even the youngest children can pick up your attitudes.
- Always provide reassurance that you will do everything in your power to protect him or her, and the entire family.
- Intentionally include God in these discussions and in your lives overall, perhaps in a more intimate way than you had previously.

CHAPTER 1

Viruses, Pandemics, and Ways to Control Them

Background Information

A virus is an infectious germ that is too tiny to be seen except with special microscopes. Depending on the virus, it may be made up of DNA or RNA, genetic material placed inside a protein layer. Viruses can only multiply when they are inside a host, that is, when they are inside the cells of a species (plant, animal, human) that will support their multiplication. In this, they are like hijackers (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1550000/, “virus”). Hijackers don’t have the car or airplane until they take control of it; before that, they are only on the lookout for it. Once they find what they need, and take it, they’re in control. So, too, a virus. Once it finds its host, it begins to multiply and cause disease.

Scientists think there may be millions of viruses. Some cause disease in plants, animals, and people. Some viruses are more of a nuisance (like the virus causing the common cold), and some are deadly (like the virus causing AIDS). There are families of viruses, meaning that—just like siblings in a human family—different ones are related to each other genetically. Again, just like members of a human family, some viruses don't cause much trouble, while others in the family wreak havoc.

The coronavirus is an RNA virus that is so named because of the way it looks under the special microscope; “corona” means crown, and the virus has little spikes on its surface. There are at least seven different coronaviruses, and most only cause upper respiratory symptoms in the nose or throat. Three members of the family cause much more serious illness, and that includes the coronavirus causing the present pandemic. It is called COVID-19: “co” for corona, “vi” for virus, “d” for disease, and “19” for the year it was first described. It was first found in Wuhan, China, in late 2019, and it is thought to have originated from a bat virus that mutated (or changed) so as to be able to infect human beings. Because it is a new or novel virus, medical science was not familiar with it. Thus, there is currently no cure or vaccine.

When a disease is localized to a very small area, it is

called an outbreak. For example, a school might experience an outbreak of chicken pox. When the area is larger, it is called an epidemic; “epi” means upon, and “demic” refers to people or district. When the area is very large, or worldwide, it is called pandemic; “pan” means all, so it is upon all the people or districts. The World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 situation a pandemic on March 11, 2020.

Coronaviruses cause respiratory illnesses, which means they are generally spread by person-to-person contact, especially through being around the sneezes and coughs of infected persons. Each sneeze and cough sends out both tiny and larger droplets that contain the virus. These droplets can land on another person or on a nonliving surface. If a person touches anything that the droplets have recently landed on, and then touches his or her nose, eyes, or mouth, the virus then enters that person’s body; it has found a new host. Since it is a novel virus, no one has immunity to it, so anyone can then get sick if they come into contact with the droplets.

It would be great if we could know who had the coronavirus by their symptoms. We could just stay away from those who are coughing and sneezing a lot, and we would all be safe. For reasons we do not understand, however, some people infected with this coronavirus

have no symptoms at all, and others are only mildly ill. Yet some people get very ill and die. So, we have to err on the safe side and treat everyone as potentially contagious (or able to spread the virus to others).

That is why health professionals and government officials have made many recommendations, including:

- Stay home if you're sick, so you don't infect others.
- Always cover a sneeze or cough so that droplets don't become airborne and reach others.
- Wear a mask so that if there are airborne droplets, they don't reach your nose or mouth.
- Stand six feet away from another person because the droplets don't usually travel that far.
- Stay away from crowds; the more people who are present, the greater likelihood at least one of them is infected (symptoms or not).
- Clean any surfaces that might have been contaminated by droplets with special bleach or alcohol disinfectants ("disinfectant" means against the infecting germ).
- Wash your hands for twenty seconds, multiple times a day. Washing hands removes the virus.

In the end, it is each person's immune system that fights the virus. The human immune system consists of cells and chemicals designed to fight threats to the body, in this case, an infectious threat. Some people, because of age or underlying medical conditions, don't have very strong immune systems, so the virus takes over. Other people have strong immune systems that go into overdrive, not only killing the virus but also destroying bodily organs in the process.

How might we explain this pandemic to children and teens?

Preschoolers: If young children know nothing about the virus, it is probably best not to bring it up, unless someone they are related to or know well is ill. Another reason to mention it is if they cannot see certain people in person (like a grandparent) and wonder why. You should always assess what a child already knows by asking: "What do you know about the virus? What questions do you have?" These questions are also useful to see if the child has misinformation, such as that one gets sick because one was bad. Although young children may not pay much attention to adult discussions, they may pick up snippets of information from adult conversations or from older siblings.

If a young child asks why everyone has to stay home, one could say: “We are staying home so that we don’t get a germ. A germ is something that makes people sick. There is a germ going around that has made grown-ups and children very sick all over the world. Because it’s easy to get the germ, we are going to do things to keep us healthy, like stay home, cover our nose and mouth when we sneeze and cough, and wash our hands a lot. The germ can be in sneezes and coughs, so that is why we cover our nose and mouth and wash our hands. You can ask me any questions that you have about this germ, and I’ll try my best to answer them.”

Elementary school-age children: It is less likely that elementary school-age children know nothing about the virus because they are not going to school, and they know there must be a reason for that. However, this age group may have much misinformation picked up from the media, older siblings, or friends. As with younger children, always assess what a child already knows, looking for any misinformation: “What do you know about the virus? Do you have questions?”

What might you say to a child of this age? “A germ is something that makes people sick, and a virus is one type of germ. There is a virus going around that has made

people very sick all over the world: adults, children, and even babies. The virus is a new one, so doctors don't know how to treat it or make it go away. Because it's easy to get the virus, we are going to do things to keep us healthy, like stay home, cover our nose and mouth when we sneeze and cough, and wash our hands a lot because the virus can be in sneezes and coughs, or on our hands. That's why you can't go to school or play with your friends, since we don't always know who has the virus and who doesn't. Doctors have found out that while some people get very sick or even die from the virus, other people don't seem to get very sick at all. So, the virus is kind of sneaky. That's why we have to play it safe. It's also why we have to clean surfaces, since the virus can live for a while on most surfaces. If you have questions about what I just said or about anything else about this virus, please ask me, and I'll try my best to answer your questions."

Teens: Depending on the age of your teen, most of the information provided in "background information" can be discussed with him or her.

CHAPTER 2

Reactions of Children, Teens, and Adults

Background Information

1. *Fear and Anxiety:* In uncertain times, anxiety is a common response, even for people who have no history of anxiety disorders. What will the future bring? Am I or my loved ones in danger? In this coronavirus pandemic, people wonder whether they or their loved ones will get the infection, and if so, how bad the illness will be. They worry about whether they will have a job or how the economy will be affected. Younger children are probably less concerned about this than teens and adults, who understand the situation better than they do. Nevertheless, even children can experience fear if they know someone who becomes ill, or someone

whose parent or grandparent becomes ill or dies. They can worry about their parents' jobs or whether they will have food to eat. Children learn a lot from the media, especially if parents play the television or radio non-stop. Even if the person who died or has lost his or her job has little in common with their own relatives, children still perceive a real threat.

Some children and teens react to fear with sadness or crying, sleeping too little or too much (with or without nightmares), eating too little or too much, or a heightened anxiety about everything. Other children and teens adopt a nonchalant attitude, as if nothing could ever happen to them or their families. In fact, they may take risks just to show how invincible they are (for example, congregating in a large group), even laughing when their parents are concerned. Other children and teens act out, a maladaptive way to manage their own fears and insecurities. Although this reaction is more common in boys, it is not limited to them.

2. *Anger and frustration:* All of us have had to change our daily lives in fundamental ways since this crisis evolved. This can be frustrating for all, when it takes so much longer to do what previously took only a few minutes, or when we can't go to the places we used to

frequent. The frustration is even more marked when people—adults, teens, and children—do not understand the reasons for the curtailing of activities. In some cases, frustration can spill over into anger. This anger can be personally directed (for example, toward family members) or impersonally directed (for example, toward leaders who advocate restriction of activities). This is especially true when the medical advice changes: as we learn more about COVID-19, for example, what we could do several weeks ago, we can't do now. As noted above, some individuals hide their fear and anxiety with bravado or an angry demeanor. This might be especially true, for example, when people lose their jobs through no fault of their own, and they need to find someone to blame. This attitude can be passed on to the young people in their lives.

3. *Loneliness:* Loneliness is a common human reaction. Normally, we think of lonely people as those who are alone, but even people surrounded by others can feel lonely if they think that no one understands them or they can't talk to anyone. This might be especially true of teens who feel alienated from their friends. Some people may not feel lonely as much as they feel claustrophobic—stuck in one place with no escape.

4. Denial/Disbelief: Some individuals will deny that a bad situation exists, and argue instead that it is all made up. Although this might seem a protective stance, it often backfires when such individuals take unnecessary risks or espouse ways of handling a crisis that are not mentally healthy.

5. Apathy: Some individuals have a fatalistic attitude that says, in effect, “There’s nothing I can do; I’ll probably get sick anyway.” Such people might fail to take care of themselves because they don’t see that it will make any difference in the long run.

6. Loss of faith: While many people’s faith gains strength in turbulent times, others lose their faith or desire to pray.

Naturally, substance abuse can occur in any of these reactions as a way to escape a difficult reality.

How might we explain these reactions?

Preschoolers: “Grown-ups are worried about getting sick or not being able to go to work. That’s because they love the people in their families and want to do all they can for them. Sometimes when grown-ups get worried, they

are sad, but sometimes they get mad. Why do you think people would get mad? [After the answer] People can get mad when they can't do things they want to do. Has that ever happened to you? So, if mommy or daddy seem sad, worried, or mad, it's not because you did anything wrong. We promise to take the best care of you that we can. And please tell us if anything is bothering you."

Elementary school-age children: "This illness has got many people worried and scared. That's normal. It's been one hundred years since human beings saw a disease like this that's everywhere; one hundred years is a very long time! When people get worried or scared, sometimes they get sad and very quiet, and sometimes they get mad and noisy. When you get scared, how do you feel? How does that make you act? What do you think is the scariest thing about this virus? Is it something you are worried about?"

"People can also get mad because they can't do what they want to do when they want to do it. Has that happened to you? Although some people say that the virus story was made up by someone, that's not true; it's real. And although other people say there's nothing we can do about it, they're wrong. There are a few things we can do to protect ourselves. [Can you think of a few?]"

Teens: Depending on the age of your teens, most of the information provided in “background information” can be discussed with them. They can be asked if they know people who react in the ways discussed and what they think about that.

CHAPTER 3

What's God Got to Do with It All?

Background Information

We live in a time when a common secular view is that human beings are in charge and will be able to understand the mysteries of the natural world, thus conquering all threats to human thriving, making life better for all. The coronavirus situation reminds us that human beings are not in charge of the created order; a germ too small to be seen wreaks havoc, causing illness and death all over the world, despite the best efforts of highly educated women and men.

Christians believe that God is in charge and that we are made in God's image and likeness. We believe that God gave us life and loves us more than we can ever imagine. Even if we do not believe that God wants a virus that can hurt millions of people, we might wonder

why a loving God permits such a virus to exist.

We would not be alone in this wondering. Throughout history, people have wondered why God (or gods) lets tragedies happen. From illnesses to wars to famine to earthquakes to droughts, human beings have speculated on why these events occur. For example, during the bubonic plague in the Middle Ages, people wondered if those who became ill, especially if they died, were greater sinners than others or if God was angry with humankind in general. The short answer is, we don't know why God lets tragedies happen. But we do know God loves us and is always with us.

Explaining God's role to children and teens

Preschoolers: These children are far too young to understand theological discussions. Thus, reassurance is the best approach. “We don't understand why bad things like sickness happen, but we do know that God loves us and is always with us. Jesus promised that would always be true.”

Elementary school-age children: Children of this age have much better reasoning powers than their younger counterparts, and they will have many opinions and questions. It is best to begin by asking them what they think about how God is present to us at this time.

Emphasize God’s loving presence, especially when we are scared or uncertain.

“Some people say that God doesn’t care about us. But that’s not the way Jesus described his Father! He said that God knew when a single bird dies or when we lose one hair from our head. That doesn’t sound like God doesn’t care or is mean. A few people even think that there is no God because a god who knows everything, is all-powerful, and loves everything and everyone wouldn’t let this happen. Jesus definitely assured us that there is a God and that God loves us and is with us in our suffering. I think that suffering is something we just can’t understand, and I don’t understand why it is allowed. But I believe that God is always with us—in good times and in suffering—because Jesus said so.”

Teens: The material in “Background Information” can be offered to teens; alternatively, the suggested conversation under “elementary school-age children” can be amended with more sophisticated language for a meaningful dialogue with an adolescent. Important here is the opportunity for young people to give voice to their ideas, concerns, and questions without having to sanitize them or state them more maturely. Be content to listen and comment when appropriate.

CHAPTER 4

Resiliency— Physically, Emotionally, and Spiritually

Background Information

All of us want to be resilient in the face of difficult situations, and we want that for the children and teens in our lives as well. Resiliency is the ability to “bounce back” after a loss, serious threat, or trial. Although it might seem that some people are just born resilient, research tells us that the skills of resiliency can be learned.

Resiliency is needed during the coronavirus pandemic, and it certainly will be needed in its aftermath, as much uncertainty exists now and will exist for some time. Things will not go back to normal in a kind of “on-

off” manner; things will likely return to normal bit by bit, two steps forward, one step back. Those who are the most resilient will fare the best, while those who are least resilient will continue to suffer some of the reactions described in chapter 2.

What does the research about resiliency reveal?

Resilient people:

- *Know that proper nutrition, rest, and exercise must be maintained.* This is as important for children and teens as it is for adults, because the building blocks of a healthy body, especially the immune system, are composed of nutrients derived from what we eat. Our bodies do much cellular repair when we sleep, so proper rest is not optional but mandatory. Finally, exercising every day is important for all of us but especially so for growing children and teens in order to ensure strong muscles and bones.
- *Know that children and teens should have a routine, just as adults should, and every effort should be made to maintain it.* A routine confers a degree of normalcy, so needed in uncertain or scary times.

- *Know themselves—their strengths, weaknesses, fears, losses, goals, joys, what they have accomplished in the past as a predictor of what they can do in the present and future.* Even children can reflect on these parts of themselves.
- *Do not deny what is happening but focus on the positives and what they can do, not on what they can't do.* Resilient people examine their reactions to see if they are helpful in coping with a situation; if their reactions are not helpful, they change them to more helpful ones. So, when children get angry because they can't be with their friends, they can be encouraged to drop the anger for a more positive reaction, to do something positive rather than dwelling on what they can't do. That may well require loving guidance by adults.
- *Find something to laugh about often.* A pandemic is certainly not a humorous situation, but coping successfully with it may well entail finding joy and humor in the “new reality” in which we find ourselves.
- *Connect in positive ways with others, looking for ways to be of service.* Resilient people don't dwell on themselves.

- *Do something that gives them joy or meaning every day;* such activities evoke the production of endorphins in our bodies, which are powerful chemicals that counteract many of the effects of negative stress.
- *Lean on God,* connecting to God in the way that seems most meaningful and natural, especially through prayer.

Remember: As members of the body of Christ, each one of us is important in the overall health of the body, and right now by keeping our distance from others we are showing our care and love for the whole body and all God's people.

Practical ways to encourage resiliency building in children and teens

Preschoolers:

- Ensure that they are eating right, getting good exercise, and sleeping well. Go for walks. Play with them.
- Ask them to think of someone to contact through voice or visual calls; then make that contact happen.
- Suggest that they draw a picture or make something for someone whom they can't visit. Then send the picture or present to that person.

- Develop a list of at-home activities to do together or by themselves.
- Ask them to tell you a joke or a funny story. Share a funny story or joke with them.
- Permit them to lead prayers for others. If possible, inform those who are prayed for.
- Speak of your love for them over and over.
- Remind them of God's love for them; encourage them to show their love for God through acts of kindness and consideration.

Elementary school-age children:

- All the ideas above can be used for this age but must be presented in an age-appropriate manner.
- Ask what difficulties they have come through before, and how they did it; would those ways work now?
- Develop a list of ways they might reach out to elderly relatives and neighbors, such as making cards or sending text or social media messages.
- Talk about ways the family might help those who have few resources, such as the homeless or those facing

large medical bills. If possible, make a donation to a charity that can assist them.

- Include health professionals, first responders, and those providing necessary services (such as grocery store clerks, delivery drivers, postal workers, and others) in daily prayer. Send thank-you notes to anyone you know of who is serving or caring for others during this time.
- Have them interview people in their family, neighborhood, or parish about their responses to the coronavirus pandemic; the interview can be in person (with people in your household) or by phone or through a virtual visit. Encourage your child to be a “reporter” presenting their findings and what they learned.
- Have them imagine they are interviewing God, asking God questions that they or other people have raised about this coronavirus; ask them to imagine how God would answer their questions.
- Permit them to lead prayers for those in need, especially those who are ill or dying and their loved ones.

Teens:

- Many of the suggestions given for younger children can apply here, if modified for age and maturational level. Because of their ever-increasing maturity, teens can be asked to imagine themselves in positions of authority. Ask them to imagine they are:
 - » *Scientists:* What strategies would they use to fight this pandemic?
 - » *Mental health professionals:* What would they suggest to ensure people stay emotionally healthy? How would they help those who aren't?
 - » *Political leaders:* What would they do to keep people safe from viral spread?
 - » *Church leaders:* how would they encourage people to stay close to God and their faith community when churches are closed?

- Encourage teens to think of a realistic positive act they could perform to help the situation. Help them to make the thought a tangible action. Ideally, this act could assist those most in need, such as the poor, ill, lonely, grieving, first responders, and health care professionals.

APPENDIX

Answers for Parents to Commonly Asked Questions

Where did the virus come from?

Scientists think it came from a bat, and that the bat virus changed in such a way to infect people and make them sick.

Why did it come now?

We don't know. Because it is a new virus, there's a lot we don't know.

When will it go away?

We don't know. But we know that when most people are immune to it, it will not be able to hurt us anymore.

What’s “immune”?

Immune means being able to resist or fight germs that infect us. Our immune systems protect us from most germs.

Why is it called COVID-19 or coronavirus?

Its name comes from the family of viruses it belongs to, the coronavirus family.

How do people get it?

Usually by being around people who are coughing or sneezing, because the virus is in the cough or sneeze. If a person comes in contact with the droplets, he or she can get the virus. The droplets can land on surfaces, and a person can pick up the virus by touching the surface. That is why we cover our coughs and sneezes, wash our hands a lot, wear masks when we leave home, and clean surfaces really well.

What happens when a person gets infected?

They often get a sore throat and fever, but some people get much sicker because the virus gets in their lungs, making it hard to breathe. They might even die. But other people don’t get very sick at all. We’re not sure why this happens, but it means that someone who

seems well can spread the virus to another person who can then get very sick.

Can the virus hurt anybody?

It can infect anyone from babies to old people.

Could it seem like the virus has gone away but then come back?

The virus could seem to have disappeared from our cities only to come back again. We just don't know what conditions make it likely for the virus to die permanently. We're still learning.

Is there a cure for it? Is there a vaccine?

Because it's a new virus, there's not a cure yet and no vaccine, but scientists are working in it.

I heard on the news that we have to self-quarantine; what does that mean?

Quarantine means to be separate from others. Because the virus spreads from person to person, if we stay home and separate from others who don't live with us, it makes it less likely for us to get the virus.

I'm scared.

It's OK to feel scared; lots of people are scared, but I will do everything I can to keep you safe.

I'm mad that I can't [go to school, see my friends, play on my team, go to my prom, etc.]

I'm sorry you can't do the things you want to do; I don't like it either; it isn't fair. But staying away from others is an important way to keep us healthy and to prevent the virus from spreading to other people, particularly those who are vulnerable. This pandemic will be over one day.

Why does God let this happen? Is God mad at us?

I don't think this is happening because God is mad or punishing us. I believe that God loves us always and is with us when we are sad or are suffering. I don't know why it is happening.

But if God can do anything, why doesn't God stop it?

I don't know the answer to that, but I believe God is with us always.

Is God mad because churches are closed?

No, God understands that to keep people safe, they can't be around each other—even in church.

When will life be normal again?

It's hard to say exactly, but life will get back to normal one day.

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