

# Talking to Kids About the Coronavirus Crisis

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As the COVID-19 crisis continues to unfold, many parents are wondering how to talk to children about the impacts of the virus in a way that will be reassuring and not make kids more worried than they already may be. Here is some advice from the experts at the Child Mind Institute.

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- **Welcome their questions.** With so much up in the air, kids are bound to have questions they might not be asking. They might range from the very serious (“Will Grandma be okay?”) to the seemingly silly (“Will my favorite ice cream parlor still be there?”). Encourage them to ask and, whatever the question, try to take your child’s concerns seriously. Your goal is to help your children be heard and get fact-based information that is likely more reassuring than whatever they’re hearing from their friends or on the news.
- **Don’t avoid questions you can’t answer.** Given how much uncertainty there is, try to be comfortable saying “I don’t know.” It’s tempting to want to reassure your child that things will be better soon, even when you aren’t sure yourself. But teaching children how to tolerate uncertainty is key to reducing anxiety and helping them build resilience.
- **Set the tone.** Look at these conversations as an opportunity not just to convey the facts but set the emotional tone. “You take on the news and you’re the person who filters the news to your kid,” explains Janine Domingues, PhD, a child psychologist at the Child Mind Institute.
- **Be developmentally appropriate.** Don’t volunteer too much information, as this may be overwhelming. Instead, try to answer your child’s questions honestly and clearly. It’s okay if you can’t answer everything; being available to your child is what matters.
- **Take your cues from your child.** Invite your child to tell you anything they may have heard about the coronavirus, and how they feel. Give them ample opportunity to ask questions. You want to be prepared to answer (but not prompt) questions. Your goal is to avoid encouraging frightening fantasies.
- **Deal with your own anxiety.** “When you’re feeling most anxious or panicked, that isn’t the time to talk to your kids about what’s happening with the coronavirus,” warns Dr. Domingues. If you’ve just learned news that’s upsetting, or that you worry will upset your child, take some time to calm down before trying to have a conversation or answer your child’s questions.

- **Be reassuring.** Children are very egocentric, so hearing about the mounting death toll on the news may make them seriously worry that they'll catch it, especially the coverage of the new syndrome affecting children. It's helpful to reassure your child that very few kids are getting sick, and that they're unlikely to catch it.
- **Focus on what you're doing to stay safe.** An important way to reassure kids is to emphasize the safety precautions that you, and others around you, are taking. Jamie Howard, PhD, a child psychologist at the Child Mind Institute, notes, "Kids feel empowered when they know what to do to keep themselves safe." Remind kids that washing their hands is actually helping everyone by stopping the spread of the virus. Involve them in your family's ongoing safety plan. That could mean letting them choose masks for the family, or coming up with a new 20-second song —we're all a little tired of Happy Birthday!— to sing while you wash your hands.
- **Keep talking.** Tell kids that you will continue to keep them updated as you learn more. "Let them know that the lines of communication are going to be open," says Dr. Domingues. "You can say, 'Even though we don't have the answers to everything right now, know that once we know more, mom or dad will let you know, too.'"

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