

Talking to Kids about Coronavirus

As coronavirus (COVID-19) spreads, it is important to talk with children, so we can guide and reassure them during times that may feel confusing or frightening. Following are some guidelines for conversation.



- * **First, find out what they know.** Be casual and straightforward such as, *“What have you heard about the coronavirus?”* or for younger children, *“Have you heard about people talking about a new kind of sickness?”* Once you know where to begin, you can correct any wrong information or reinforce accurate information. Some children may want to talk about this a lot and others may not need to discuss it all. Try to follow your child’s lead but be sure to let them know they can always come back to you with any questions or concerns they have.

- * **Speak in a calm and comforting way.** Explain to them that most people who get sick have flu-like symptoms and most will be ok. Pray together as a family. Remind children to always look for the Helpers in any situation – doctors and hospitals who help people who get sick; scientists who are working on a vaccine; government officials and community leaders who help us stay safe. And remind them that God loves all of us and is right here with us as we struggle to understand.

- * **Reassure children they are safe and loved.** Children can experience anxiety, fear and a sense of personal risk. Limit television viewing for children under age 6 because young children can’t always process images or messages in news reports and often can’t make the distinction between different countries or conditions, so they may fear that whatever they see or hear will definitely happen to them. For older children/teens, watch reports with them and discuss what you see. Remind children that tragic events or serious illnesses are not our everyday experience and that the adults who love them will always try to take care of them. *“It’s ok to feel scared. Hearing about sickness can be scary, but I love you and I will always do my very best to make sure you are safe.”*

- * **Remind children of safety procedures.** Knowing what to do in situations helps children feel more empowered and less afraid.
 - ➔ Wash hands frequently and properly. This means use clean water and enough soap to create a good lather. Include wrists, both sides of both hands, in between fingers, etc. Lather for at least 20 seconds (about the time it takes to sing *“Happy Birthday”* twice)
 - ➔ Try to avoid touching your face – especially nose, mouth and eyes.
 - ➔ Sneeze into your elbow sleeve or into a tissue you then immediately throw away.
 - ➔ Talk about measures already in place, such as school policies or medical protocols that doctor offices already follow. Knowing safety plans may make them feel less fearful.

- * **Keep your schedule as normal as possible.** Try to continue with family routines such as mealtime or bedtime rituals. When unusual things are happening, children (and adults) can often find some comfort by connecting with some sense of normalcy, even in the midst of chaos.

- * **Help children put things in context.** Children may fear they will get sick or die, or that a beloved friend or family member might. If they are worried, try a phone call or video call. *“Let’s call Grandma and see how she’s doing today. Would that make you feel a little better?”*

- * **Recognize that teens may react differently.** Their reaction may be more intense or cynical, but their needs are likely the same – to be reassured that no matter what happens, they will be ok. *“This is scary for all of us. I can’t promise you it won’t touch our family, but I can promise you that whatever happens, we will deal with it together.”* Also with teens, be sure to talk about where they get their information and how to evaluate the bias or trustworthiness of different sources.

- * **Discuss developments honestly but without graphic detail.** Be gently concrete and truthful when answering questions. Be careful of using euphemisms for death such as people “passed” or “went to sleep” or “went away”. These can send scary messages to younger children who may wonder if they might go to sleep and not wake up or if their parents will go away forever.
- * **Reinforce your family’s values.** This is a good time to talk about your family beliefs regarding the sanctity of life or helping others. Reiterate your position as a person of faith, but don’t imply simple answers by saying something like *“I don’t know why all this is happening, but we do know that our God is loving and good.”* Do be aware that some religious explanations that may comfort adults may unsettle a child. For example, saying “It must have been God’s will” or “God needed them in Heaven” could be frightening to the young child who may then worry that God might want them to come to Heaven right now as well. Assure them that our Good Shepherd is watching over us all.
- * **Be prepared to stay home for a few days or weeks.** With things changing so rapidly, it’s likely you could be in a self-imposed or officially-mandated quarantine to stay home. Try to think ahead: get in a few supplies and maybe some library books, new puzzles or a craft project. If a quarantine stretches over several weeks, everyone will become bored of electronic screens, so think of this as a time to bake together, play board games, read more books or work on a project.
- * **Just like adults, children can have varied reactions.** Children may ask lots of questions, cling to parents or exhibit other younger behaviors. Sometimes a child’s anxiety shows up as stomachaches or headaches; it can also lead to difficulty sleeping or nightmares. Older children and teens may make inappropriate jokes and glib comments or may direct their anger and frustration at other seemingly-unconnected situations. All of these are ways children deal with worry or stress. Expect and give permission for a wide range of reactions. It is important to validate your child’s feelings and not explain why they should feel a different way. Children may need more physical affection and one-on-one time with parents, so build in extra snuggle, reading or play time with your child.
- * **There are no magic words, no perfect “right answer”** In a crisis, our feelings can be intense and varied, so give your children and yourself some time to adjust. The best words to say are always, *“I love you!”* Just be with your child and talk. Remind them this situation is still developing and that you’re always available to talk again. Remember also there may be resource people at your church who can be of tremendous help and comfort, along with community agencies or professional counselors who can assist you and your family.

Other Resources:

- World Health Organization video about hand washing: <https://youtu.be/lisgnbMfKvI>
- Center for Disease Control – frequent updates: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html>
- Fact sheet from CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/share-facts-h.pdf>
- Article: <https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2020/how-to-talk-with-kids-about-the-coronavirus/>
- Great Parenting Article: <https://www.ahaparenting.com/BlogRetrieve.aspx?PostID=641509&A>

