

# Calming your child's coronavirus fears

March 20 2020, by Serena Gordon, Healthday Reporter

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(HealthDay)—Schools are closing. Sports and other activities have been cancelled. Everything is changing. In the midst of this chaos, how do parents keep kids from stressing too much?

"For families, this is truly now hitting home," said psychologist Robin Gurwitch, from Duke University and the Center for Child and Family Health, in Durham, N.C.

"Families now need to think about how to manage having children at home for extended periods of time. First, families need to set up a schedule and a routine. Keeping as much routine as possible is important," she said.

But Gurwitch added that it's important to be flexible, too. "Things change quickly and anxieties are running very high. Parents will have to be more patient and attentive to their child's needs," she said.

And, what about the elephant in the room—should you talk to your child specifically about coronavirus?

Dr. Eric Herman, a [clinical psychologist](#) at Children's Hospital of Michigan in Detroit, said, "It's going to be hard to tell kids that everything is going to be fine when we're closing schools. They have to think that something big is going on."

Herman said to let them ask questions, and to really listen and respond to the specific questions they're asking.

Gurwitch recommended a more proactive approach: "Ask children what they know. Ask, 'What do you think about this?' and check back in with them frequently."

Both experts advised letting children and teens know that it seems as if their age group won't be hard hit by the virus. Children may get the virus and not have symptoms.

Because the situation is quickly evolving, Gurwitch said it's a good idea

to preface anything you say when talking to children about the virus, with something like, "Here's what we know now."

And, let them know it's OK to be worried or scared. Explain that these steps are being taken to try to keep everyone as safe as possible.

It's fine to let kids know you're a bit on edge, too. Parents can say, "This makes me a little worried, too, so this is what we're going to do to stay safe," Gurwitch said.

Herman suggested acknowledging that kids and teens (and adults, too) are going to be disappointed. Many events, some of them very special, like graduation or a school play, will be cancelled, and it's normal to feel disappointed when that happens.

## **Setting Up New Routines**

"Because this is such a huge disruption and there are lots of changes, it's really important to keep what we can as similar as possible—meal times, bath time. And, it's important that rules still apply," Gurwitch said.

If schools are closed, she said to set up the school's distance-learning program right away. Kids may still have homework, so set up a time that is standard for getting homework done.

But parents should keep in mind that "children may not learn as fast. They may need extra help with homework and coursework. Things may take longer to complete. Attention and focus are being tested," Gurwitch noted.

Herman agreed that keeping a schedule is paramount. "Kids now have a lot of time to overthink and worry, so try to get onto online school. Keep bedtime the same," he said.

## Need to Know

Because this [coronavirus](#) situation is so fluid, it's hard for adults not to stay glued to the news. But both experts recommended limiting kids' exposure to TV or online news.

"I wouldn't have the news blasting," Herman said. "People don't always compute information correctly or in the same way. Little ones think differently and we need to psychologically protect them—put them in a bubble for a little while."

Gurwitch said it's fine to take some time to check into the news, preferably out of your children's earshot. "Things change quickly, and you want to make sure you get updated information, but it's not healthy 24/7," she explained. "If you have very young children—under school age—they shouldn't be exposed to the news, and don't assume that because they don't seem to be listening, that they're not hearing the news."

She added that kids in elementary school should have little access to the news. And, if middle or [high schoolers](#) want to watch the news, she advised watching it with them, and then turning it off and talking to them about what they've just seen so that you can correct any misperceptions or concerns.

Herman said he's particularly concerned for children and teens who already have psychological conditions, such as anxiety or obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).

"For those kids, we really need to downplay the news and try not to feed the worries. Turn the TV off. Limit conversations about the virus. For kids with OCD behavior, watch for how often they're hand-washing," he suggested.

## Stress Relief

Keeping to a typical schedule doesn't mean kids shouldn't have fun. Both experts said since parents and kids may be home, it's a great time for families to reconnect. Take walks together or play games in the backyard.

If you're stuck inside, play board games or learn about your kids' video games, especially ones that encourage any kind of activity. Video games, video phone calls (FaceTime, Skype, others) and social media may help kids stay connected to friends and family without increasing infection concerns. Check in with kids though, to ensure that no bullying behaviors crop up online.

"We don't want to be completely isolated as we isolate," Gurwitch said. "We're charting new territory here, with new worries."

Find ways to relax and help your kids relax. Chat with friends, write in a journal, listen to music or try yoga.

**More information:** Learn more about talking to kids about coronavirus from the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

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