

Talking to kids about coronavirus

March 6 2020, by Caroline Watts



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Kids are going to have questions and fears about the COVID-19 virus.

Caroline Watts, a practicing child therapist and Penn GSE's Director of School and Community Engagement, says parents should be prepared to address three areas:

"First, the health and safety issues at hand. What information and behaviors do we want to teach our kids?"

"Secondly, I think about the emotional tone of things. How anxious am I? How anxious is my child? How anxious is the community they're in? How can I help them feel stable, safe, and secure while also taking this very seriously?"

"Third, I think about the context. This virus has brought out a lot of ugly rumors and prejudices, often directed at people from China or other Asian countries, as well as at Asian Americans. I want to make sure kids know that the virus doesn't pick targets based on ethnicity."

How can parents convey those messages to kids? Watts suggests these steps:

Start with yourself

Panic isn't helpful to anyone. "We have to manage our own fears and our own feelings in order to help our kids," Watts says. "If we're feeling panicked, our kids are going to feel that from us."

But an appropriate level of concern and preparation will be beneficial.

Before talking to kids, check for the latest updates from reputable sources like the Centers for Disease Control. Don't just quote Facebook. If there are reports of cases in your region, check with state or city officials to see if they are recommending specific precautions.

Be direct and reassuring

Start by saying that you have done your homework on the virus, and are

going to do everything to keep your child safe. Offer correct, but limited, information, and say that you will keep them updated as you learn more.

Then connect the virus with events and experiences that kids can relate to.

While the coronavirus is not the flu, the similarities make it a good point of reference. Parents can talk about when they had the flu, or remind their child of a time when the child had the flu.

And like the flu, the vast majority of [coronavirus](#) cases are moderate to mild, especially for young people. Watts suggests saying something like: "If you do get sick, you might feel crummy for a while, but you will get better."

It's also a good idea to turn off the TV or radio when the news comes on. Kids, especially anxious kids, don't need constant updates on infection counts or death tolls.

Model good behavior, and find some fun

If you want your kids to wash their hands with soap and water for the CDC's recommended 20 seconds, they need to see you doing it. And not just during a demonstration, but every day. Same goes for coughing into your elbow.

But life can't be all lectures. When you're at the store, ask your kid what type of soap they like. The pink one that smells like cotton candy? Great. When you get home, have your child put it by the sink so that it's ready for use.

Think about what quarantine would look like

Right now, schools and businesses are open across the US. But families should think about what they would do if they are asked to isolate for up to a month.

First, tell kids that you aren't just staying inside to protect yourselves—you are isolating to protect the community. If you don't get sick, you can't pass the virus on to someone else.

Individual plans will vary greatly, based on everything from parents' working conditions to time of isolation. But Watts says in all cases that it's important to design some structure. Just be flexible about it.

"What are things we'd want to do, what are things that we should get done?" Watts says. "I'm the kind of parent who would say, what about some learning? What about some SAT prep?"

But, she cautions, you can't do that all the time. It's important to figure out ways to give people space within the confines of your home.

That might include relaxing some rules. If you have a hard limit on the amount of time your kids can play video games, maybe let them play longer. If you try to limit phone time at home, understand that phones might be a way for your kids to stay connected to their friends.

Try to remember, and remind everyone in the household, that this is temporary.

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

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