

# Addressing long-term pandemic anxiety in children

April 21 2022, by Homa Shalchi

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Young children growing up during the pandemic have faced confusion and fear surrounding coronavirus and their safety. As we enter a new phase of the pandemic, parents are navigating how to keep their children

safe while also considering the long-term impact that the virus will have on their children. A Baylor College of Medicine expert offers tips.

"Parents should have a clear idea of what their thoughts are about the virus and get on the same page as their partner," said Dr. Laurel Williams, professor in the Menninger Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Baylor College of Medicine. "When parents are not sure what they think and feel it can cause [anxiety](#) and confusion for the child. That goes for double if partners don't agree."

Williams suggests asking your child how they feel and what they think of the [pandemic](#) at this point in time. She recommends avoiding questions such as, "Are you worried you're going to get sick?" Instead ask, "What do you think of masks or [hand washing](#)? What comes to mind when you put your mask on or don't put your mask on, or when you wash your hands or don't wash your hands?"

If children are demonstrating fearful behavior toward the virus, such as repetitive handwashing, first parents should have an age-appropriate conversation about the family's new pandemic safety strategies. Make this a team effort and be concrete about the new plan.

"Many anxiety treatments involve a very specific technique of actively avoiding what your brain is telling you to do. This can be hard and initially lead to a bigger display of anxiety, and that is the reason for discussing in advance. Doing this with children can help distract them by having them do other things rather than continuing to wash their hands, for example," Williams said.

If you tell your child, "We will wash our hands one time before we eat our food, but that's the only time," they may initially react negatively, but should move on just a few minutes later with the new family plan. Each time after this, parents should see less of a meltdown, and the issue

will eventually extinguish. The goal is to help your child gradually so they stop feeling the need to do these things excessively. If your child gets distressed trying to follow the new family plan, they might be experiencing a level of anxiety where [parents](#) might consider seeking professional help.

As large events and extracurriculars are returning, families planning on attending or enrolling their children in activities should assess their own family risk. Parents should talk with their children in advance about the rules and how the family will approach the event. Williams suggests allowing the child to voice their choice, as long as their choice does not run counter to the family or venue requirements.

Provided by Baylor College of Medicine

Citation: Addressing long-term pandemic anxiety in children (2022, April 21) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-04-long-term-pandemic-anxiety-children.html>

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