

How to Talk to Your Kids about COVID-19

Schools and community organizations around the country have begun announcing closures due to coronavirus (COVID-19). If you are a parent, you have likely started thinking about how your children may have been impacted by the news. However, we've heard from many parents who feel uncertain about how to talk to their children about COVID-19. You may feel tempted to avoid talking to your children about COVID-19. But between the news, social media, other kids, and school announcements, your children are probably more aware of what's going on than you realize. You do more to love them by being thoughtful about how you approach such conversations than by avoiding them. Here are seven practical tips for talking with your children about COVID-19 so that they feel safe, not scared.

Prepare Yourself

Take steps to make sure your needs are being met by other adults—don't put that burden on your children. Keep in mind that children often follow their parents' lead when it comes to responding to a crisis. Children are like sponges and absorb their parents' reactions, words, and energy. Talking about difficult issues like COVID-19 isn't easy. If you're feeling anxious, that's natural. Part of the reason is that you're having your own feelings about what you or your family may be facing. And you may be worried about saying or doing the wrong thing—remind yourself that it's okay to struggle and even to make mistakes. But also remember that you are there for your children, not the other way around. Before you share with your kids, give yourself the time you need to notice and process those feelings, so that you can be fully present to your children's needs and feelings.

Be Hopeful

Seek to instill hope among your family. Keep in mind that hope doesn't mean that everything is going to work out the way you long for things to be. Hope doesn't mean the problem will go away. Instead, think of hope as what keeps you going in the face of adversity: Some things, maybe even lots of things, will be lost, but there are still good reasons to push forward. Instill hope into the conversation by embracing what has helped your family find strength, meaning, and comfort in other difficult situations. At the same time, resist the temptation to minimize possible challenges your family and community might be facing. The goal is to strike a tone that is hopeful and honest.

Use Age-Appropriate Language

Recognize your child's developmental ability to understand the situation. When your children ask questions, answer them to the best of your ability, using words and concepts that are appropriate for their developmental stages. Likewise, be sure to create space for questions your children might have. It's normal to be scared of inviting questions, as you likely have more questions than answers yourself. That's okay, but be honest if you don't know what to say by letting them know that you don't know. And when possible, assure them that you'll look into it and get back to them. (If you make this promise, make sure you follow through.) Be authentic with your children, but remember to talk to your children as children, not as adults.

Provide Reassurance

Sometimes children may feel responsible for events that are entirely beyond their control. When it's not clear that there is a plan in place to face COVID-19, children may, in some way, feel they must bear the weight of that responsibility. When you reassure children that the adults are managing the situation, you give them permission to be children.

Try to Maintain Routines

COVID-19 is already quickly starting to disrupt daily life for many families across the United States. Taking small steps to help our students regain some sort of normalcy will help them cope more effectively. This does not mean ignoring what has occurred, but rather trying to maintain some structure

in our interactions. Familiar activities, schedules, and routines can go a long way in helping your children feel secure. There is something soothing and healing, even in mundane day-to-day life rhythms.

Discuss What They Are Hearing

Kids pick up on more than we realize. With COVID-19 so heavily in the news, odds are they have heard things on TV, at school, at church, or from you that they don't fully understand. Whether it's in the car, at the dinner table, or while playing ping-pong, ask your children questions like: Have you heard anything new about coronavirus? Who did you hear it from? Listen carefully, affirm their feelings about what they're hearing, help fill in any knowledge gaps, and answer questions they may have.

Monitor and Limit Media Exposure

Young children's media exposure should be very limited. Parents may wish to monitor their child's time online and, depending on their age, use of social networking sites. Presently there is a lot of unhelpful and incorrect information online. Take steps to monitor what your children are reading, hearing, and watching. This may also include parents monitoring and appropriately limiting their own exposure to anxiety-provoking information.

If you would like more information about this topic or need support, please contact **Marcia Richard LICSW, Director of Psychological Health** for the 141st ARW and Associated Guard Units. She can be reached at number is 247-7087 or 979-0051 (cell). Marcia is available 24/7 by phone and on base for confidential appointments Wednesdays and Fridays during the pandemic outbreak. Chaplain Whiteley is also available 24/7 and for appointments Tuesdays and Thursdays during this time. He can be reached at 509-991-1114. If you are in need of resources for your family or have questions about finances, please call Mary Thomas, with the Airman and Family Resource Center, at 509-999-5125.