

Talking to Kids About COVID-19

Many parents are asking for support around ways to talk to their children about the pandemic in a manner that is reassuring and not inadvertently making kids more worried. Stanford's Pediatric Anxiety and Traumatic Stress Clinic has put together some guidelines and resources to help you think about ways to cope as a family. We hope that this guide will help make this time of uncertainty a bit less stressful. It is important to note that these guidelines apply to all ages; specific recommendations for teens have been included where appropriate.

Stay calm.

Children tend to react to how they see the adults around them react. As a parent, you are in a position to model for your child how to respond to COVID-19 in a calm manner. Make sure that you manage your own stress so that you are in a better position to support your child. If you notice you are feeling stressed, take space to calm down before trying to have a conversation with your child.

Talk about it.

Our news is currently inundated with information about COVID-19 and it seems to be one of the only topics of conversation. As much as we'd like to shield our children from what is happening, the information is out there. People are wearing masks, kids are talking to their friends, and changes to our way of life (e.g., schools closing) have made it increasingly more apparent that something is happening. We encourage you to **talk about it**. *Not talking about it can actually lead to increased worry.*

Listen to what your child has to say.

Ask your child what they have heard about the coronavirus and how they are feeling. Create the opportunity for them to ask questions. Be prepared to answer their questions and refrain from asking them too many questions. Follow their lead. This gives your child the space to think through what they want to know and encourages them to engage with you.

Be developmentally appropriate.

Children may misinterpret things that they hear. Talking about what is going on allows you to listen to what your child knows, correct any misperceptions and misinformation, and explain it at a level that they can understand. Keep in mind that teens will need more information than younger children.

Some examples: "There has been a lot of talk about the coronavirus. Tell me what you know about it?" Or, "Tell me what you've heard?" "What questions do you have about what's going on?"

Validate your child's feelings.

Acknowledge how your child is feeling and reflect back to them what you are hearing. For instance, "I know it is scary (insert word they use). Sometimes I feel worried too. Here is how we are going to keep ourselves as healthy as we can so that we can be OK." It is important to let them know you are listening, and it assures that you understood what they said.

Convey the facts.

Talking to your child about what is happening can help to provide factual information, reduce worry, and open the door for additional conversations. As a parent of a younger child, you get to filter the news and help your child feel informed. If you don't have the answer, that is ok. You can always say, "I know it can be hard not to know the answer, and right now, we do not have all the answers. As soon as we know more, we will let you know." As a parent of a teen it may not be possible to filter their access to news. Encourage your teen to use credible sources and discuss information they have heard.

Focus on the positive.

Reassure your children that they are safe and discuss all the things that they can do, and that are being done, to keep us all protected. Focus on the CDC recommendations for staying healthy. This can help empower your child. Explain how kids seem to have much milder symptoms, if any. Talk about the things that your family can do to help keep each other safe and take care of those around you (e.g., "we can do lots of things to keep our family as healthy as possible. We need to wash our hands to get rid of any germs. When we sneeze or cough..."). Helping others can be particularly protective and providing a sense of hope, security and confidence helps your child feel calmer. For teens, highlighting their role as a model for their younger siblings can help to provide a sense of leadership. Ask your teen for their ideas about how they can help at home or find volunteer opportunities at <http://teensgive.org/> or <https://www.volunteermatch.org/>.

Limit media exposure.

While talking about what is happening is very important and helpful, you also want to limit the amount of information you are providing your child and monitor your child's exposure to news/social media outlets. Remember that your child is a sponge for adult conversations. When children do not fully understand what is being said, they fill in the gaps with ideas that may be scarier than the facts. When watching TV or listening to the radio, you can facilitate a factual conversation by saying: "We just heard a news story about the coronavirus. What did you think about it?" Validate their response and prompt for any questions they might have about the story. It is important to keep in mind that teens are likely accessing more media than younger children. Make sure to check in with your teen about what they are hearing/seeing and maintain limits on media use.

The Pediatric Anxiety and Traumatic Stress Clinic used the following resources to help create this document:

- National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) • Parent Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT) International • Child Mind Institute
- Center for Disease Control (CDC)

Make it fun.

Try to find ways to turn new requirements into fun and entertaining activities (e.g., making up a song for handwashing, having a competition to see who can refrain from touching their face the most, creating a new family tradition). Engage in fun projects as a family, play games together, identify bedroom/home improvement projects, and use FaceTime to connect with family and friends. Depending on your child's age, a playdate via FaceTime may work too! Create cards to send to friends and family or to send to elderly neighbors/local nursing homes to maintain connections.

Maintain a routine.

With so much uncertainty, routines can help provide consistency and predictability. Kids respond well to knowing what to expect (and parents benefit too!) and this can be one way to insert some degree of certainty into your day to day. Make an effort to establish a routine, including time for regular meals, snacks and "recess" (i.e., free play or outdoor time). Use visuals to make it fun and engaging. And, be sure to maintain a consistent bedtime, as this is important for everyone's well-being. Think along the lines of a summer vacation or winter break.

Stay active.

Fewer social interactions and less opportunity to exercise for an extended time frame can impact mood, especially in teens. It is helpful to have some exercise, social interaction with peers (e.g., social media), and engagement in fun or valued activities each day. Getting outside for a hike or a run (while staying 6 feet from others), creating dance videos, learning new dance moves, or playing active video games (e.g. Just Dance, Sports Party, Mario Tennis) can be fun ways for older youth and teens to exercise. Many teens are already familiar with ways to connect virtually through FaceTime, social media, and online games. Give your older child or teen opportunity to privately connect with friends virtually through their preferred method or offer to throw a "movie night" with snacks for your teen. A new Google Chrome extension www.netflixparty.com allows teens to have a movie night with friends while social distancing. Encourage your teen to learn more about a topic that interests them or develop a hobby. Teens can learn many things on YouTube, and many libraries offer digital access to books, albums, and movies.

Be patient.

With the recent "shelter in place" orders, many parents are having to juggle more responsibilities as the boundaries between work and family are more blurred than ever. Many parents are also having to take on the role of teacher to manage their children's remote learning. Setting reasonable expectations as you and your family make this transition are going to be important. Be patient with yourself and your ability to manage. Take breaks when you can, reduce work requirements if possible, relax rules around screen time, and remember that tomorrow is always a new opportunity to try again.

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Tips for Managing Parent Stress:

Be prepared.

Seek information from credible sources (links provided) and create a plan of action for your family.

Have your own coping plan.

Make sure to get enough sleep, eat well, exercise, and connect with family and friends. Also create a list of things that you enjoy that can help you relax (e.g., mindfulness practice, watch a movie, read a book, go on a walk, puzzle, journaling, listening to music, etc.). Notice when you are feeling anxious or panicked and take space to calm down. Make sure you have other adults you can talk to about your concerns (out of earshot of your child). Modeling use of coping strategies and calm behavior can help reduce your child's worries.

Take breaks from listening to the news.

The non-stop news coverage, email updates, and social media postings about COVID-19 can be exhausting and may take an emotional toll. Just as you are limiting your child's media exposure, be mindful of how much exposure you have.

Keep routine as much as possible.

Try to find activities on which you can anchor your day. Similar to our children, loss of our daily routine can make us feel more anxious and dysregulated. Having a schedule and things to look forward to can help contain anxiety. Impose structure similar to a normal work or school day and make sure to focus on consistent sleep-wake and meal times, as well as exercise and social engagement.

Separate work space from living space.

If possible, create a work-space at home that is separate from everything else. This can help you stay organized and focused. Your work space can be an office, a spare bedroom, a writing desk in the corner, the dining room table or any other space in the house. The goal is to have a designated work space separate from your regular activities of daily living. Leaving this space when work is finished can help you physically and mentally transition from work to home life.

Stay connected.

While gathering in person is to be avoided, it is more important than ever to remain connected to others. FaceTime, Skype, phone calls and other social media platforms can be a great way to see loved ones and friends. Schedule a coffee break via FaceTime with a friend or colleague, turn phone calls into video calls, plan a "virtual happy hour", or have Sunday family dinner together via FaceTime or Zoom. Get creative with ways to maintain face-to-face connections and be sure to make time in your day/week to do so.

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Helpful Resources:

Up-to-date information

- [CDC](#)
- [CDC Information on children and COVID 2019:](#)
- [WHO](#)
- [Community Mitigation Strategies](#)
- [Reducing Stigma](#)

Links for Kids

- [Just for Kids, A Comic Explaining the Coronavirus](#)
- [Corona Kid's Flyer](#)
- [Children's Social Story Book](#) for kids up to 7: Designed to discuss COVID-19 and how it makes them feel. Printable to draw on and engage kids and parents. Available for free download in many languages.
- [Ideas to make handwashing fun](#)
- Generate [handwashing infographics](#) based on your favorite song lyrics

Links for Parents

- Child Mind Institute's [COVID-19 Resource Center](#)
- National Center for School Mental Health [Resource Center](#)
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network's [Parent/Caregiver Guide to Coping](#)
- National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) [Talking to Children About COVID-19](#)
- Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress [Helping Homebound Children Cope](#)
- Harvard Medical School [Talking with Teens](#)
- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) [Tips for talking with your children:](#)
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's [Tips for Talking with Children](#) for Caregivers, Parents, and Teachers during Infectious Disease Outbreaks. The information is broken up by age range

Links for Self-Care

- The Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA) [resource list](#) & free online group
- SAMSHA's [Tips for Social Distancing](#)
- American Psychological Association (APA) [7 research findings](#) that can help cope with COVID-19
- Tips for [Taking Care of Yourself](#)

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- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention's [5 Tips for Coping with Uncertainty](#)
- Mindfulness and Relaxation Apps for Teens/Adults
 - Headspace
 - Calm
 - Stop Breathe Think
 - Relax Melodies
 - Insight Timer
- Websites with free guided meditations:
 - https://www.uclahealth.org/marc/body.cfm?id=22&iirf_redirect=1
 - <https://palousemindfulness.com/guidedmeditations.html>
 - <https://hospitals.jefferson.edu/departments-and-services/mindfulness-institute/mbsr-guided-practices.html>
 - <https://www.tarabrach.com/guided-meditations/>

Ideas for Keeping Kids Busy at Home

- [Busy Toddler](#) (ages 2-10)
- NCTSN's [Activity List](#)
- Melissa & Doug [Ideas](#)
- Free [weekly](#) activities ages 6m to 8years
- [GoNoodle](#) to keep kids active: free, short interactive activities to do at home for ages 4-12
- [Kids Stuck at Home?](#) Here's How to Keep Them Busy and Grow Their Brains at The Same Time
- Virtual birthday party for young or elementary school children, free [resource](#) to party with friends
- Live streamed [dance classes](#)
- Peninsula Behavioral Health's list of [resources](#) for all ages
- [Scholastic Learn at Home](#) Open access to daily learning journeys divided into four grade spans—Pre-K–K, Grades 1–2, Grades 3–5, and Grades 6–9+, covering ELA, STEM, Science, Social Studies, and Social-Emotional Learning.
- [PBS Kids](#) and [PBS Learning](#) and Daily Activities
- [Khan Academy](#) for free online classes and resources for ages 2-18
- [Houseparty](#): Group video chat app - a way for groups of teens to connect via live video. Two to eight people can be in a chat together at the same time. If someone who's not a direct friend joins a chat, teens get an alert in case they want to leave the chat. You can also "lock" a chat so no one else can join. Go to commonsensemedia.org for helpful information regarding social media apps.

This list of resources is for informational use only. Stanford's Division of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry and Stanford Children's Health does not endorse or guarantee these resources.

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