

Tips for Talking with Children about COVID-19

Kristen Anderson, Waterloo, ON

"Coronavirus"--a word that only a few months ago we had never even heard. Now it is almost all we talk about. Our lives have been disrupted in ways we could never have anticipated and the situation changes so rapidly it is difficult to keep up...or plan. As parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, friends...how do we talk with the children and teens in our lives to help them make sense of everything happening? How can we listen without interrupting? Without telling them not to feel afraid or worried? Particularly if we are afraid or worried ourselves?

They are tough conversations to have but they are also very important ones.

Although I have been concerned and worried about this issue, as has my daughter, I assumed my teen boys would just be relieved not to have to attend school. While the latter part is true, they also do have worries I realized this morning. I mentioned to one of them that I had a sore stomach and I saw the expression on his face change immediately as he said "well, that's not a symptom right?" This from the guy whose only mention of the virus previously was when he was sharing memes with me. The point being, kids express their concern and worry in a myriad of ways.

Here are a few tips for how to talk with our kids when things are scary:

Make time to talk.

Make time for talking, if you can. However, we all know that kids don't talk on our schedule, they talk on their own. So this means being available when they are ready to talk. Sometimes, that's tricky to figure out or to make happen. Try the small moments, like when you are playing together or out for a walk together. I find in the car is best with teens. Be sure children know they can come to you when they have questions or want to talk.



Be curious and interested in what they are thinking and feeling.

Kids know some information already. Precautions were put into place at school and now school has been cancelled. Kids talk with each other. Older kids are going to see everything that we see online, in social media, on TV. Talk to kids about how some stories on COVID-19 online may be based on rumours and inaccurate information. If you don't know the answers, that's ok! This situation may be especially difficult because there are few definitive answers at the moment.

Ask kids what they know. What they have heard.

Ask what part worries them.

Help them sort out what is fact and what is opinion.

Ask questions—what have you heard? What are you thinking about it? How are you feeling about it all? Ask their opinion about what they are hearing—What do you think about what is being said on social media? In the news? Answer

questions too, if they ask. Try to answer honestly and simply. Provide information that is honest, accurate and age-appropriate. Keep your answer to the question asked as, often, children are satisfied with one piece of the picture. Too much information can be overwhelming, particularly for younger children. Older children and teens may enjoy talking more about the situation. They will have opinions! It is important to take some time to listen to what they are thinking and help them make sense of what they are thinking or believing.

Try to “read” your child during the conversation and follow their lead.

Maybe your child will just want to say one thing and be done. Maybe they will want to talk now, maybe later. Don't be afraid to bring it up and ask what they have been thinking but also don't worry if they don't want to talk. It is important to give them their space and let them express themselves in their own ways. Kids deal with their emotions in very different ways.

Honour and respect their ways of expressing themselves.

Children sometimes draw what they are thinking and feeling. Help your child to talk about the drawing, what they were thinking as they drew it. If they don't want to talk, that's ok. Just thank them for sharing the picture with you and invite them to talk anytime they would like. Be curious about what they are playing, whether with their toys or online and join in, if you can. Don't forget too that a lot of kids are loving this time at home!



Show empathy and understanding.

For any of us, when we feel truly heard and understood, we feel naturally better. Brene Brown (<https://brenebrown.com/>) tells us that “empathy fuels connection” and we know that connection with someone we love and trust, makes the world feel safer and our distress more manageable. Simple comments such as “I can see that you are feeling worried about this” or “I understand all these changes can feel scary” are very powerful messages of love and support.

Ask if there is any way you can help.

Or if there is anything they would like to do with you, as part of dealing with their feelings. Some people are mobilizing to help seniors or people with limited mobility to get the supplies they need. Others are starting neighbourhood email groups to help share information and assist each other. Talk as a family about things you may be able to do to help without risking your own health or

anyone else's. These actions bring a sense of community, of connection to others beyond ourselves. Connection helps us feel loved and safe.

Don't forget about the power of just having fun together! While we are all at home is a great time to roll out the board games, go for walks together, find time for the things that bring you joy.

Be aware of our own feelings and reactions to the situation.

As parents, and grandparents, we may be frightened of getting sick ourselves, or our loved ones getting ill. We can't hide these feelings from our children. It's ok for them to know we may be concerned. The trick is to be sure our feelings do not become the focus of our conversations with our children. Also, let your child know what you are doing to handle your feelings.....taking deep breaths, talking with a friend, snuggling on the couch, finding fun things to do....

Seek outside help, when needed.

Talking with a counsellor or a trusted friend can make a big difference. Your children may not want to do this, but you can. And, when you talk with a counsellor or friend, your feelings can very much be the focus. We all need this, sometimes!

Reach out to us at Parenting Now. We are still available to respond to emails and comments. Please post a comment on this article or click the "click to connect" button on this page and send us an email. We will respond!

Be kind to yourself.



It is hard to get these conversations right. Especially when we have our own fears.

Loss and tragedy. Sadness. Fear. They're real emotions and real experiences and when we have the chance to talk about our thoughts and feelings surrounding these kinds of events, we can begin to make sense of what we are feeling. It does not make them go away or make things "better". But it does help us feel connected. That's true, no matter how old we are.

Reach out. We are in this together!

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