

# children and coronavirus

## A GUIDE FOR FAMILIES AND PROVIDERS

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### SUPPORTING OUR CHILDREN

As the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic continues to evolve, a child's natural curiosity and ultimately their concerns may grow with the current and increasing uncertainty. The guidelines below are intended for parents, caregivers, educators, and child care providers on how best to care for and communicate with children. You are encouraged to actively engage in an open dialogue with children in ways that are appropriate for their child's age, developmental stage and state of mind. No matter what, the core messages should remain clear, simple, and consistent.



You are the buffers for your children. Every parent and caregiver must be the most reliable source of information and support. Nearly all of us are experiencing some level of concern, and perhaps even serious anxiety, about the challenges we are facing in this unprecedented world of the COVID-19 pandemic. That said, to the extent possible, we must try to shield our children from our own concerns and anxieties as much as possible. Children can sense and absorb the emotional state of their parents.

It may be tempting to spend hours of your day scrolling through endless social media posts, but it is highly recommended that you follow trusted websites and social media handles for the most accurate and up-to-date information. Social media and websites may have dangerously inaccurate information. You should rely on the extremely reliable information found on sites managed by your local or state health department or the information on the websites of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) or American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP).

### HEALTH AND HYGIENE

#### Model Handwashing and Good Hygiene

Your children should be washing their hands for at least 20 seconds before and after meals, after they go to the bathroom, after they come in from outside, and after they blow their nose. Children should be reminded to avoid touching their face with unwashed hands. Teach your children the five easy steps for handwashing—wet, lather, scrub, rinse, and dry<sup>1</sup>. Make handwashing a fun family routine by singing Happy Birthday or their favorite song or turning it into a game. When soap and water hand washing is not feasible, use of hand sanitizer is a good alternative. Encourage children to also cough and sneeze into their elbow so they do not pass germs onto other people. Practicing good hygiene can be fun and is the best way to prevent illness.

#### Staying Active at Home

Maintaining regular physical activity is important for your child's physical and mental health. Children can stay active indoors with fun activities like role-playing, dancing, and yoga. Here is a [list of indoor activities](https://www.todayparent.com/family/activities/15-ways-to-keep-kids-active-indoors-even-if-you-dont-have-much-space/)<sup>2</sup> you can play with your children to keep them entertained and active. There are various online sources you can turn to like [Live Science](https://www.livescience.com/coronavirus-kids-activities.html)<sup>3</sup>, which has compiled a list of lessons, games, virtual tours, and other activities. If you are able to be outdoors, go for a walk or a bike ride but make sure to maintain a safe distance of 6 feet from other people. But avoid playgrounds or other activities that encourage close contact with other children.

<sup>1</sup> CDC. Handwashing: A Family Activity. <https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/handwashing-family.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.todayparent.com/family/activities/15-ways-to-keep-kids-active-indoors-even-if-you-dont-have-much-space/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.livescience.com/coronavirus-kids-activities.html>

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### COMMUNICATION

#### Be Honest and Keep it Simple

Your children have likely been hearing about the coronavirus from news stories and other kids. If they do have questions, stick to the facts. Assess what they already know in order to tailor your response. Explain that COVID-19 is caused by a new type of germ that is spreading around the world. COVID-19 spreads like the flu, or any viral cold. Most importantly, remember that sneezing and coughing can make germs spread through the air and infect someone else. Encourage children to ask questions and clarify misinformation, as needed but don't overdo it. You can stay updated about the outbreak by referring to the highly trusted Centers for Disease Control (CDC) (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov>) or American Academy of Pediatrics (<https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections>).

If a child has concerns about their own mortality or the health of their parents and grandparents, be honest. Reassure them that children are much less likely to get sick from the coronavirus, but it can make older people sicker. That is why it is important they practice good hygiene and keep their distance from their grandparents and other older people. Most people who get sick can stay home, rest, and recover<sup>4</sup>.

#### Children as Messengers

Older children, and especially older siblings such as teenagers, can help support younger children particularly by modeling good hygiene practices for younger children. Apply the same concepts as suggested for younger children but discuss with them how they think they can ensure all members of the household are hearing and understanding important information.

#### Engage Your Child

Use simple, open-ended questions to check in with your children from time to time. Ask younger children if they have noticed any changes around them and if they have any questions. Keep your answers short and simple. Older children, and teens in particular, are often silent, not expressing fears or concerns. Parents need to go where they are and just be there for them. Ask indirect questions, like, "What are your friends worried about?" "Can I help you find places to look for accurate information?"; "How's schoolwork going?"; etc.

### TECHNOLOGY

#### Monitor Social Media Use

Many children, especially teens, may be more reliant on technology to stay connected with friends. Modern social media and communication platforms can spread fear and disinformation rapidly, and the heavy reliance of older children on these tools presents new concerns during school shutdowns and periods of social distancing. Parents and other caregivers are encouraged to discuss with the children in their care how they are using social media, if they are learning anything good, and regardless of the answer, promote safe and responsible use.

#### Leverage Technology

Technology can also be leveraged in a positive way to comfort children who may begin to miss their friends and extended family. With so many communications platforms currently available for free, use them to setup virtual gathering of family and friends. Schedule these gatherings so children can have something to look forward to while furthering the benefits of building routine.

<sup>4</sup> PBS. How to Talk to Your Kids About Coronavirus. <https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/how-to-talk-to-your-kids-about-coronavirus>

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### EMOTIONAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

#### Listen and Watch for Signs of Distress

Uncertainty and concern around the virus can make children feel anxious. Look for cues that your child is anxious—they may be scared to be alone or leave the house, clingy, irritable, or extra weepy<sup>5</sup>. Provide reassurance. Make yourself available to your children and encourage them to talk about their concerns, fears, or questions. For children that have not yet heard about the virus, or are too young to fully comprehend, it may be wise to avoid bringing it up and introducing unnecessary anxiety.

#### Manage Fears and Anxiety

If you notice signs of anxiety or distress in your children, remind them that their parents, schools, and doctors are working to keep them healthy. Even though young children may not understand what is going on, they can notice an adult's worry and anxiety. Caregivers should model calmness about coronavirus to limit anxiety and concerns among children and should shield them from media coverage as much as possible<sup>6</sup>. Over time, children's fear and anxiety may turn into anger, aggression, and acting out. Encourage energetic activities as a diversion to the boredom created by constantly being indoors. As a parent, your mental health and well-being will greatly affect the children in your care, so ensure you are taking care of yourself.

#### Maintain Routine

With school closures and event cancellations, maintaining a consistent schedule with bedtimes, meals, school work, and exercise can minimize your children's concerns. While the routine may be new and different, the fact that it is a routine will help create stability. Remind them that this is temporary and important for keeping everyone healthy. Plan at-home activities such as crafting and video chatting with family and friends.

#### Assign Responsibility

Maintain a sense of control throughout this time of uncertainty by reminding your children that they are part of the solution in limiting the spread of the outbreak. Practicing good hygiene and staying home contributes to keeping them and others healthy. Teens can be given appropriate tasks within the home to help them exercise and demonstrate control. Engage teens and older children to ask them how they think they can help and encourage or support creative solutions within the constraint of social distancing.

#### Parents: Don't Hesitate to Seek Help

Sometimes we need more support than we can give our children, so if you are in need of additional support, contact your pediatrician or primary health care provider as they may have some helpful advice. Specialists or behavioral health providers could be required if additional assistance is required. Signs that may indicate that you may need extra support may include: a child experiencing sleep problems, becoming aggressive or hostile, or significantly less communicative.

- **NCDP COVID-19 Resource Center:** <https://ncdp.columbia.edu/microsite-page/covid-19-global-pandemic>
- **RCRC Initiative:** <https://ncdp.columbia.edu/rcrc> || **RCRC Toolbox:** <https://rcrctoolbox.org>
- **Media Inquiries:** <https://ncdp.columbia.edu/about-us/media-relations/>

<sup>5</sup> Psychology Today. How to Talk to Kids and Teens About the Coronavirus. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/smart-parenting-smarter-kids/202003/how-talk-kids-and-teens-about-the-coronavirus>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

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