

Pandemics produce radical changes in our lives. While we are told to engage in physical distancing, we know that social connections build resilience in the face of adversity. We need to make sure that children receive the necessary supports in order to cope.

Helping children cope during a health crisis is a three-phase process:

1. Dealing with the emotional impact
2. Sharing accurate information
3. Promoting child participation in infection control practices.

Listed are some recommendations to help people speak to their children about COVID-19:

Be aware of how your anxiety affects your children

Children are like sponges, and they can absorb the anxiety around them. Research shows that whenever parental anxiety increases, so do their children's. Because young children are at risk of developing misconceptions during a crisis, this can lead to more anxiety. These issues are particularly relevant for children who tend to be more anxious than most.

Work on a schedule together

Children of all ages, including teens, have experienced a change in routines. Younger children, in particular, rely on their routines for predictability and security. It is important to keep as many established routines as possible at this time. Because older children are no longer going to school, they require some structure or a plan to get them through the day. Teens may experience the hardest time because they are asked to stay indoors and limit contact with their friends. Allowing children and teens to express frustrations and participate in planning around activities can give them some control over the situation.

Children have a right to information

Our current news cycles inundate us with updates on growing numbers of confirmed cases and deaths. We know that during the SARS epidemic, many children became fearful and quietly believed they or their family members would die. Children as young as three years can understand complex medical issues when adults use simple language and share basic facts. In doing this, we are respecting children's right to know what is happening.

Start with asking children to tell you what they think is going on. What is happening and why? By getting a sense of how they understand the situation, misconceptions can be exposed and fears alleviated.

Be as truthful as you can. Describe how the virus acts like a bad cold or 'bug', and that many people will get sick, but most will be okay and get better. Reassure children that the adults around them are doing everything they can to keep the family safe. Depending on the age and temperament of the child, more specifics can be shared.

In terms of physical distancing, explain to children that this is not a ‘snow day’ and that everyone will be spending a lot of time indoors over many days.

Praise, and encourage, self-care

Once children show an understanding of what is happening, they should be encouraged to participate in ways that can help. Talking about how the virus spreads fosters greater child participation in hand washing and physical distancing.

Children should be praised when they engage in measures that support infection control. Thanking them for ‘helping’ out reminds them of their responsibilities and conveys appreciation for their efforts. Research has shown that encouraging self-care at a young age fosters independence and mastery of health-related skills later in life.

Remember: we’re all in this together

When we all do our part, we demonstrate to children the importance of the ‘collective we’ and our shared responsibility to keep everyone healthy and safe. Establishing consistent and safe ways to connect with family and friends teaches children that despite challenges, the people around us still care.

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